

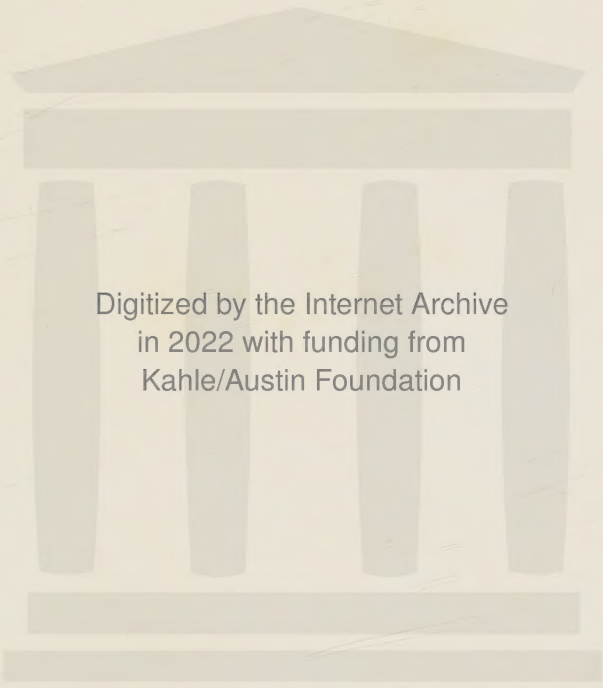
HIS MOST DEAR LADYE



A STORY
OF MARY COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE
SISTER OF SIR PHILIP SIDNEY
by
BEATRICE MARSHALL



HIS MOST DEAR LADYE



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HIS MOST DEAR LADYE

*A STORY OF MARY, COUNTESS OF PEMBROKE,
SISTER OF SIR PHILIP SIDNEY*

BY

BEATRICE MARSHALL

Author of

'The Queen's Knight Errant,' 'An Old London Nosegay,' &c.

Sidney's sister, Pembroke's mother,
Death! ere thou hast slain another
Wise and fair and good as she,
Time shall throw a dart at thee.

Lines attributed to BEN JONSON

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His Most Dear Ladye

I

THE COMING OF JEANNE

IT was on a day in May in the year 1599, a wondrous fair morning, that I alighted, travel-stained and weary, with my baggage, and Reuben Windt, an old Flemish servant, in the bustling courtyard of the George Inn, at Salisbury, whither I had come from Antwerp.

My eyes were yet red and swollen from the tears I had wept for my dead father, who had lain then but a short time in his grave. Though he was an Englishman I had lived my life till now abroad in foreign towns, for the most part in Antwerp, and this was the first time that I had set foot on my father's native soil.

My father was a scholar much respected for his learning, who had enjoyed the friendship of Hubert Languet (friend of Melancthon and mentor of Sir Philip Sidney), Plessis du Mornay, Giordano Bruno,

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and other famous men of letters. He and I had been all the world to each other, for my mother, of French blood and Huguenot religion, died when I was of too tender an age to remember her. Her nearest kinsfolk had perished on the bloody eve of St. Bartholomew, and my father also having no relatives but distant cousins, bequeathed me in his last mortal sickness, which was a tertian ague, to the care of his old friend of Oxford days, Master Jasper Meredith. They had not met for many years, but wrote to each other from time to time, and I knew that my father had dispatched a letter writ with his dying hand to his dear friend, Master Meredith, at Burcombe, in the county of Wilts, in which he warned him of my coming and commended me to his guardianship.

Our landlord, the Advocate Hildebrandt, had wound up my father's affairs, and Madame his wife had seen to the packing of my few possessions, and such books and manuscripts as had not been sold with the rest of my father's library.

The priceless *Scipio's Dream* of Cicero, infinitely prized by him, I would not entrust to my coffer, but I bore it in my hand, and held it clasped beneath my cloak as I took shipping with Reuben Windt for Dover from Antwerp harbour. M. Hildebrandt, his wife, with their three chubby boys and their one stout daughter, Anna, the only companion I had ever

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had of my own sex and years, stood in a row on the quay and gravely waved us farewell. I still hugged the precious manuscript in cramped arms while I awaited Master Meredith before the inn at Salisbury. I wished sorely that Master Meredith would come, for I knew not what to do next, and I wondered why such swarms of gaily-clad folks were pouring into the city. The streets were as busy and alive as Antwerp's on a market day, and I had expected Salisbury to be quiet and sleepy withal. The inn was quite full, and gallants sat drinking in the bow-windows that opened on the yard, and were making merry over a tragedy some mummers were rehearsing beneath the gallery.

Many jostled me carelessly as they pushed by; others stared and made me feel conscious that my black hood and cloak were out of harmony with the festive atmosphere; and for the first time it struck me that the familiar figure of Reuben Windt might be in strangers' eyes somewhat quaint and uncouth. Then to my relief, a voice fell on my ear, the very sound of which was comforting, so full it was of a friendly gentle courtesy.

"Is this Mistress Jeanne Trefusis? Welcome, child; welcome for thine own and thy father's sake. I fear 'tis long past the hour I fixed to meet you." He looked at his dial and added, "Alack, 'tis indeed. Jack may have told you how 'twas ever my failing

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to forget time and other things, and as one grows old, such faults do not grow less, I fear."

The beardless face that looked down on me from a tall, spare figure was not an old face, though framed in snow-white hair. There were no lines and puckers in the skin, which was of an extraordinary smooth paleness. The grey eyes could twinkle despite their dreaminess when the grave lips broke into a smile, as they did when he spoke again after I had stammered forth a few shy words in response to his greeting.

"Thou hast thy father's brow, child, and belike some of his nimble brains behind it. Poor Jack."

I had never heard my father spoken of by any one as Jack before, and to hear Master Meredith speak his name thus in a tone that was so tenderly affectionate and sorrowful, brought the tears to my eyes again. Yet I felt less forlorn, and almost happy in a sense at finding myself under the protection of one who had known and loved my dearest in his youth.

"Come, my horse and servant and a pillion for thee are waiting without at the Deanery. Methinks we shall reach Wilton near the hour when Her Majesty cometh thither. She is on progress to my Lord the Earl's and lieth there this night and to-morrow. Our Countess, my gracious patroness, hath writ a pastoral to be performed in the Royal presence."

So this was why the streets and inns were crowded

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and the people junketing. 'Twas to do honour to the Queen. I, too, heavy in spirit and tired as I was, thrilled at the thought that I might see her, the great Queen Bess, of whom I had read and heard so much, my father ever holding her in reverent esteem, and talking of her with the enthusiasm of a loyal subject, albeit his choice was to live outside her realm.

"Perchance we shall see the Queen, sir," I said.

"It's more than likely. If we do not see her on the way home, Her Majesty will still be nigh all to-morrow at my Lord Pembroke's. My boy and girl will expect to take their share of the festivities; otherwise 'twould please me better to forego them and tarry in my study."

I remembered my father had said that Jasper Meredith was of all too modest and retiring a nature, and would never become a bishop as did many who possessed but half his scholarship. He hid his talents under a bushel, and the only eye of influence to descry them was that of the fair Countess of Pembroke, the world-renowned and never-forgotten Philip Sidney's sister, who, like her gallant brother, made it her chief delight to foster genius and take divers students and poets under her wing. She would fain have had Master Meredith for her private chaplain in succession to one Gervase Babington, who had been promoted to a bishopric, but my guardian had

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preferred to rest content in a small cure near to Wilton.

We did not quit the inn yard without some mirth at our expense, for Reuben caught his foot in a tight-rope that two jugglers were stretching across our path, and he fell with my cloak-bags heavily on the cobbles.

“He should hasten to greet the Queen. A pretty figure, in truth, for Her Majesty’s eyes,” a voice said, mockingly; and another—

“He’d better have a care not to come too near, or he’ll assuredly be whipped and stoned out of the road by the gentlemen ushers, so ill can the Queen’s Majesty brook ugly sights.”

I burned with indignation at the impoliteness of these English people, and was glad that their jeers were in a language which the object of them could not understand.

I had known Reuben Windt since his wife, my nurse, had dandled me in her arms. He had served my father faithfully and closed his eyes and would have gone through fire and water for him. So what did warts and pock-marks, and an ungainly, clumsy gait count against such true devotion? To me his very ugliness was dear.

“Is it true that the Queen suffers persons to be whipped and stoned because they are ill-favoured?”

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—I asked the question as we passed beneath a gateway, out of the din and clatter of the High Street, into the cloistral calm of the Close.

“’Tis true that beauty of feature and grace of form have proved the passport often enow to her heart, sometimes without other qualities, which thou must have heard. Yet,” he added with a smile flickering again on his lips, “’twas her frog-faced French wooer, whose exterior was as unsightly every whit as his mind was vile, who, in years gone by, came nearest of all suitors to winning her hand. Aye, but ’twere more seemly in us not to recall Her Majesty’s past foibles and vagaries, but rather should we think of how long and wisely she hath ruled over her people, how great she hath been in inspiring greatness—England’s Elizabeth, as Mr. Drayton hath happily entitled her. Do not forget, child, if thou behold’st the Queen to-day what a glorious sun Her Majesty hath been, though ’tis now a setting one.”

I was not likely to forget. Had I not read and pored over Master Spenser’s *Faerie Queen*? Did I not know *Gloriana*, *Britomart*, and *Drusilla*?

When we came to where the horses and servant stood, there was another delay ere we started on the homeward journey. Master Meredith asked as I was being lifted to the pillion whether the burden I

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carried so carefully under my cloak was my lute ; and then I could not refrain from disclosing the treasure.

"See, 'tis Cicero's *Scipio's Dream*, sir. I have borne it over the sea, that I might hand it into your safe keeping in memory of my father."

I liked to see how he flushed with pleasure and astonishment beneath his ivory skin. He took the manuscript into his arms as lovingly as if it had been a babe, and exclaimed—

"'Tis rare, worth a King's ransom. Where did thy father hap on such a treasure?"

And I told him that amongst my father's pupils at Antwerp was a wealthy young Greek who had brought it from his home at Athens and had presented it to my father in gratitude for what he had taught him.

"Aye, our lettered Countess will much rejoice in this. And good master Dean in his study yonder would fain have a glimpse of it, I know. Tarry a moment and I will take it in and surprise him."

He opened a postern in the ivy-covered wall, and hurried with the manuscript across the sunny sward, to a side entrance, while I sat on the pillion and again awaited Master Meredith.

The air was very soft and still and sweet with the scent of laylocks in the Deanery garden. I looked up at the dainty spire of the cathedral which cleft a



SALISBURY CATHEDRAL AND BELFRY.

The Coming of Jeanne

sky of purest blue. It seemed as ærial as lace-work, and methought, at that first view, this cathedral church of Sarum was fairer and more perfect in its way than the churches and cathedrals I had seen in other countries—even than that at Strasbourg with which 'tis oft compared. It had not a so grey and ancient aspect, and though I knew 'twas reared hundreds of years ago, to me it had the look of having been built by angels' hands but yesterday and set down there in its fair setting of velvet meadows and umbrageous trees. Nowhere else methinks do green country and sparkling river seem to roll so near to the very cathedral door as at Salisbury.

The silver chimes had rung out three quarters ere Master Meredith came forth from the Deanery, with the short bent figure of the Dean beside him. Both their heads were bowed over the manuscript which they held open betwixt them.

"Here is the little traveller," my guardian said, "poor Jack Trefusis's child."

The Dean peered up at me with the sunlight in his near-sighted eyes.

"A true scholar's daughter," said he. "A true scholar's daughter with a nice discrimination for what is of value in letters. Methinks most maids of her years would liefer have brought a doll than a manuscript on a journey."

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I was small and looked younger than my age, I knew, despite having lived since babyhood so much in the company of grown people, but nevertheless I felt somewhat affronted at the Dean thinking me perchance young enough to play with a doll. Anna Hildebrandt and I had buried our last dolls long ago in the notary's garden at Antwerp, and Georg Hildebrandt, who was going to be a pastor when he grew up, had read the burial service over them.

"She is as old as Stella when Astrophel first beheld her with delight," Master Meredith said.

"Ah well, maybe I am not discerning in the ages of maidens," the Dean made answer, "and I have my excuse therefore, inasmuch as I am a childless man and not blessed with twenty olive branches like my Lord Bishop. But methinks," he added, still blinking at me with interest, "this little lady will have to increase in stature more rapidly than hath been her wont hitherto if she is to overtake your Ambrosia."

"Ambrosia is uncommon tall and keepeth pace with her brother in growth, as in everything else."

I wondered why Master Meredith sighed as if he felt some sadness as well as pride in speaking of his children. Then with the manuscript in his hand he mounted and we rid out of the Close.

II

MISTRESS AMBROSIA MEREDITH

WHEN Mrs. Dorcas, the housekeeper at the Rectory, after unpacking my cloak-bags and laying away my clothes, left me that night in the little white chamber with heavy beams next to Ambrosia's in the gable, I lay 'twixt the lavender-scented sheets wide awake for hours. How could I sleep after a day so long and crowded, as all days seem to be that are full of new experiences and impressions? In my ears there still echoed the sound of clanging bells, the blare of trumpets and other softer music, mingled with the shouts and laughter of the merry stream of holiday folks, mountebanks and bear-wards, amidst which Master Meredith and I had found ourselves as we rode along the high road from Salisbury to Wilton; and more distinctly than all I heard the weird terrible cries of the Tom o' Bedlam, who was stationed at the finger-post with pins stuck all over him, tearing his hair and ranting most dismally. Before my eyes floated pictures of garlanded casements, broidered hangings, flower-strewn streets, and such a

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

brave procession of fair dames and gallant lords on richly-caparisoned horses the like of which I had never seen before, winding down through the green lanes towards Wilton House.

Coming close to its great outer gates Master Meredith had backed into the shade of a clump of chestnuts, and, as good fortune would have it, we were privileged to see the Queen descend from her coach and walk through the gates, her host the Earl of Pembroke walking beside her bare-headed, accompanied by his two sons, beautiful youths who did bear themselves and their bravery with the splendid air and grace of young Spanish nobles. The Countess and the gentlewomen of her household were waiting to receive Her Majesty, Master Meredith said, beyond the inner gate, whither she passed on foot.

Out of the darkness the Queen's face looked at me, as I had seen it that noon, with the pitiless sunlight of May dancing on it, showing the network of lines about the mouth and the crowsfeet beside the eyes, which all artists were forbidden to paint and all mirrors to reflect, so that the Queen knew not how the hand of Time had shrunken and withered her. One could see that she was ashen-grey, despite the great red wig and paint upon her cheeks. Her gown blazed with jewels, and with farthingale and velvet cloak and double ruff added thereto,

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

must have been a sore weight to carry. Yet she alighted from the coach in a sprightly fashion, and walked some few paces with an erect and haughty carriage, then quite suddenly she came to a pause, and asked for a stick. She proceeded leaning heavily upon it. It was said that never before in public had the Queen's majesty been conquered by her infirmity, and at sight of it a hush fell on the crowd, and their huzzas ceased.

"The Queen is weary. I warrant that my Lord Pembroke's stags will rest in peace to-morrow," someone had said to Master Meredith. Though he had thought fit to warn me that the Queen's was a setting sun, I had been near to crying for disappointment to see so shrivelled an old woman upholstered in finery instead of the grand Gloriana I had so often pictured, the goddess worshipped of poets and heroes. But at that moment, when the long-fought enemy of advancing years overcame her of a sudden and in sight of all those people gazing at her from the ditches and the tree-tops, to which many had climbed for a better view, she seemed, as it were, to bow before it and submit almost humbly by walking with the support of a stick—at that moment I could have shed tears of pity mingled with admiration.

I shed them now as I lay awake in the stillness of the night and recalled the scene.

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

Then my thoughts went back to the row of stolid round countenances on the quay at Antwerp. Already the Hildebrandts, in their tight, dun-coloured jerkins and starched ruffs, were becoming shadowy memories, part of a life that was over—a life the last link with which would be severed when poor faithful Reuben departed on the morrow to take shipping again and to seek fresh service with his wife Angéle in the Low Countries. He was well content, having brought me to a safe haven, where I had in truth been made most kindly welcome, but not by all. One there was who had greeted me only coldly with her lips, and with her dark flashing eyes had said plainly she wished I had not come.

It was she whose soft breathing I heard on t'other side of the arras which divided the chamber I was in from hers. Now and then she babbled in her healthy sleep and called to the vixen that she had tamed and made a pet of.

To be conscious that Ambrosia had at first sight looked with scorn on me, the pale-faced little orphan in my dust-powdered hood and cloak, did not affect one tittle my opinion of her. I thought her most beautiful, and longed earnestly that she should love me and not scorn me withal.

Ambrosia was dark. Her hair was blacker than the raven's wing, like that maid of the Queen's whom

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

people had nudged each other to look at by the gates of Wilton House. I knew not till afterwards that the reason why that lady had attracted more notice than others in waiting on Her Majesty was because she was Mrs. Mary Fitton, sometime beloved of the young Master William Herbert. Beyond the blackness of her hair and eyes Mrs. Fitton was colourless as a waxen image, but Ambrosia's cheeks and lips glowed scarlet as the rowan berries. Her upper lip was short and so strangely curved that it drew the lower one up to it in a firm bow which gave an almost fiercely determined expression to the young mouth.

Ambrosia and her brother had come flying out of their father's study at the sound of horses' feet and met us in the little flower garden as Master Meredith led the way to the grey stone porch of the low-gabled Rectory. The resemblance 'twixt brother and sister was so extraordinary that to describe one is to have described both. They were not twins, but no twins could have been more like unto each other. Had they changed clothing, the boy might have passed for the girl and the girl for the boy. Nat had the same black hair waving over his temples and hanging in thick curls on his neck, the same gipsy warmth of colour and darkness of eye and brow, the same catch in the red lips. They were almost of a like height, straight and tall as young saplings, lithe and restless in their

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

movements ; tingling with life to their finger-tips, as if wild creatures, bred on air and fire and sunlight. How did Master Meredith come with such children—he the silver-haired, gentle, retiring scholar ? ”

“ Of course you forgot us, father, and your promise,” was Ambrosia’s greeting in a ringing voice of reproach.

“ Eh, my dear ; what promise ? ”

“ Did you not promise to be back from Salisbury in time to take us to the knoll on the road to Amesbury, whither my Lord Pembroke rid out with his train this morn to meet the Queen ? But you have come so late that methinks there will be nought to see now.”

“ That is true,” answered her father. “ We have just seen the Queen pass into Wilton House. I was delayed somewhat in fetching Mistress Jeanne from ‘ The George.’ And as to taking you to the knoll, I must confess I did forget that I promised it. And have you spent all this time within doors waiting ? ”

“ Yes,” said Nat. “ I told her ’twas silly, and that when ’twas twelve of the clock and you had not returned, you would not mind if we went forth without you. But Ambrosia wouldn’t come, because you had bidden us mind our Virgil till you came back.”

Master Meredith’s face lighted.

“ ’Twas well done, Ambrosia, my good girl,” said he. “ You obeyed orders like a soldier, and were

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

faithful to your duties, though Nat here would fain have tempted you to desert them. Never mind; to-morrow the Countess hath invited us to the pastoral, and thou shalt be rewarded."

The boy laughed carelessly.

"Aye, but how she chafed, and stamped, and railed while you didn't come, sir, and said that she wished Virgil had never been born! I, for my part, would be content if he and Homer had been born in Britain, and so had writ these yarns in English instead of Latin and Greek."

"Tut, tut! I would fain not hear son of mine talk like an ignoramus and profane the classics. You will shock your new comrade Mistress Jeanne Trefusis."

The two shot a glance at me, half-indignant, half-suspicious, and I felt that my love of books and the dead tongues they abhorred would in no wise commend me to them as it might to their father.

Then Master Meredith had shown them the precious manuscript, which he spread out on the table laid for a meal, with white napery and pewter trenchers and goblets, in the small square hall.

"Is that old yellow-covered parchment really worth a mint of gold angels? Methinks I would not give a brass doit for't," Ambrosia said.

"Speak not so lightly of what you cannot understand or estimate the value, wench. Knowest thou

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when those faded characters were penned, the Romans were masters in this island of Britain, while our forefathers were still freebooters living about the mouth of the Elbe. Pregnant with interest as the lines are themselves, what may not be read into the spaces betwixt them? Echoes of the Forum; the varied life of the Roman world; and then afterwards, what of its travels in Greece? Aye, if the parchment could speak, what might it not tell us of where it journeyed, and where it rested, hid and forgot, till the great re-awakening—the dawn of the New Learning.”

Thus Master Meredith discoursed, but 'twas to me alone, for Nat and Ambrosia had gone to stretch their long pent-up limbs in the sunshine of the May afternoon. Nat's whistle brought the dogs to their heels. Ambrosia tucked Ruby, the vixen cub, beneath her arm, and with its golden brush sweeping her kirtle, they had cleared the sweet-briar thicket which divided the grass-plot from the orchard.

They raced—how they raced!—up and down, backwards and forwards, glinting in and out of the grey-lichened trunks, the daisied grass beneath their swift feet, the pink blossom snowing on their heads. They played for the sake of play, as if movement in itself were a sheer delight. As I watched them I thought of how different had been the slow, deliberate

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

games of my Flemish playfellows, who never played at anything without an object, mapping out what they should do before they stirred.

This was the beginning of a fascination I was always to feel in looking on at the antics of those two radiant beings. They came vividly before me in that first wakeful night as they had bounded and scampered about, with the fair green landscape behind them billowing away in fertile vales and low hills into the blue distance.

And they come before me now, after the night of long years—the pair of brilliant, laughing, defiant faces as they looked in careless youth, ere sorrow, bitterness, age, or death had touched them.

They rose with the lark, it seemed, for methought I had scarce fallen asleep when I was roused by Nat's voice below bidding Ambrosia get up and go a-bird-nesting with him.

Ambrosia sprang out of bed with a bound that shook the rafters. There was a sound of splashing of water and scurrying into clothes; and then she must have descended by the window, for the next moment I heard laughter and voices on the paved path beneath.

“Didst thou waken Mistress Jeanne?”

“No; would you have had her come with us and make the three that is no company?”

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

“I meant that I hoped you had tip-toed about softly so as not to waken her. She is weary after her travels belike, and should be let sleep late.”

“Heigh-ho! You are going to consider Mistress Jeanne, dance attendance on her!” gibed Ambrosia, “ask her when she is tired, and if she hath the vapours or a headache. But I will not, I warrant. She would have been happier to have stayed with her Antwerp friends, and I would fain she had. She is but half English, and a bookworm to boot—a worse bookworm, I trow, than Philip Massinger or my Lady Pembroke. Father will be ever holding her up as a pattern to us. ’Twas through her he forgot us yesterday, so that she saw the Queen and all the fun, and we saw nothing. She’ll be too sorrowful to come to the pastoral at Wilton to-day, so perchance you will stay at home, too, and bear her company.”

Ambrosia must indeed have thought I slept very soundly, for her voice came through the open pane of the lattice on the wings of the breeze with great distinctness.

“Hush! Speak not so loud lest she wakes,” Nat said. “’Tis not fair to blame her for yesterday’s mischances. Come, let’s hasten now to Grovely Wood, or we shall have to be back ere we’ve found the wren’s eggs.”

Then I heard their footsteps and converse die away,

Mistress Ambrosia Meredith

and there was silence again without, save for the voice of the May wind, the chattering of starlings and twitter of finches in the eaves, and the distant song of a milkmaid. I got up, and putting my head out at the lattice, breathed in the fresh sweetness of the early morning air.

Over the fields beyond the orchard, gold with the buttercups, Ambrosia and Nat were hieing towards the woods as fast as they could tear. I was sure now that Ambrosia had made up her mind to dislike me before I came, and did not want me. She would never love me I was afraid.

But Nat? I was not so sure that Nat would not love me as a second sister. Yet somehow I did not seem to set so great store on winning his affections as Ambrosia's.

III

AT THE RECTORY

I DRESSED myself in my stuff gown, which was of the same dove grey as my holiday taffetas, with slashings of black velvet on the tight-fitting sleeves and folds of fine white cambric at the neck and wrists. It was not the fashion amongst my mother's people to wear heavy mourning weeds, and it had been my father's wish that I should be apparelled always in the simple habit of the Huguenot maidens, such as my mother had worn when he had wooed and won her on his travels in France. In Antwerp it was not peculiar, for Huguenot refugees abounded in that city.

My hair, thick and glossy, though without a wave in it, was coiled close round my head under a little cap of muslin and lace. As I caught my reflection in the small mirror of polished metal hanging on the white wall, I wondered how Ambrosia would look with her flowing curly locks held in such durance as I was accustomed to pin mine. By the time I went down-stairs every one in the house was up, and I

At the Rectory

heard Mrs. Dorcas scolding the cook-maids. Master Meredith was stooping over the flower-knots before the porch. He looked up when I came forth, for I was tempted into the garden by the beauty of the morning. He greeted me with a smile, and I noticed again what rare sweetness there was in his smile and melodious cadences in his voice as he said that he hoped I had enjoyed refreshing slumbers and slept off my weariness. He was making a posy of jonquils, bear's-ears, blue columbines, and larkspur.

"You love flowers—I need not ask. Next to books and music, they are the greatest joy in life."

"Yes, I love them," I answered; "but in Antwerp we had no garden; I had to rest content with nose-gays bought at the market. So I am more ignorant of flowers than I am of books. There are many growing here that I know not the names of, and have never seen."

"You know this belike by one of its names," said he, plucking another blossom, which he gave me. "'Tis the double campion, called by our country gentlewomen, bachelor's buttons. They flower from now on through the summer. Some call them cuckoo-flowers, and some 'Fair Maid of France.'"

"I like the last name best," said I, fastening the flower in my kerchief, "because of my mother."

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“ Ah ! She was a fair maid of France. Jack, your father, drew a picture of her in words for me in one of his letters, but I never saw her.”

I followed Master Meredith round the knots, as he added to his posy divers kinds of lilies, double daisies blush-pink, and one speckled, which he called “ Jack-a-napes on horseback.” The Rectory garden stood high above the road, but was sheltered by a great shady beech and flowering shrubs and evergreens. It overlooked the red-tiled roofs and church tower of Wilton town, and a fair and sweet country, which looked to my eyes uncommon rich and green after the arid flats round Antwerp. One saw for miles and miles everywhere ; tall elms lined like sentinels the hedges of the fields and little round woods crowned the bare hills. Near at hand were the beautiful glades and slopes of the park of Wilton House, with the sparkling Nadder rippling through it, and the many chimneys and gables of the stately pile showing above the trees. On the opposite side of the white road was the little stumpy church so thickly draped in its mantle of shining ivy that the old grey stones beneath were scarce visible. Beyond the churchyard were a few cottages standing in a cloud of apple-blossom and one long, low house of sun-baked red brick, which, albeit the roof was of thatch, had a more distinguished air

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than an ordinary cottage, for it stood in the midst of velvet lawns and well-kept paths, and was approached by steps, and an alley of yews carved in many fantastic shapes.

I asked Master Meredith what house it was and who lived in it. He told me that it was the Grange, belonged to the Earls of Pembroke, and was taken care of by an aged gentlewoman years older than the Queen herself, and who could and had cause to remember the great change that passed over the land when the monasteries were dissolved by King Hal, for she in her early girlhood had been a nun in St. Edith's famous nunnery, whose Gothic towers had once risen from the ground where now stood Wilton House.

"You observe well, little one," Master Meredith went on, "and mark unconsciously what is of note. That unpretending dwelling and its gardens yonder was the paradise our Countess often sought with her beloved brother, that summer he had absented himself from Court, having incurred the Queen's displeasure by his bold protest against the d'Alençon match. Thither they would often come, as they sometimes went to Ivy Church beyond Clarendon, attended by but one servant, and enter by a private way to spend long sunny hours in the literary studies in which their souls delighted. There they

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worked at their rhymed version of the Psalms, and Sir Philip scribbled on loose sheets his *Arcadia*, designing it alone for the delectation of the dear fellow-student and sister of his soul, and little intending or dreaming that it should succeed *Euphues* as the favourite reading of fair ladies all the world over, as indeed it hath.

Now I knew why 'twas that the English landscape with its many trees and low hills, though new to me, was not strange ; I had roamed in it before in the pages of the Countess of Pembroke's *Arcadia*.

It would seem that my guardian held the Countess in highest esteem, and loved, above all things, to talk about her ; and when I knew her too, and was captivated by her wondrous charm of person, her gifts of mind and goodness of heart, as all needs must have been—I did not wonder at Master Meredith's enthusiasm in singing her praises.

“Methinks that was the happiest time of the sweet lady's life,” he went on, “those weeks that she and her brother spent together, escaped from the ceremony in the big household, engaged in their darling pursuits of poesie and study. They lived rustically simple, enjoying syllabubs and strawberries and cream beneath the trees, and sometimes taking their repast in the hayfield. Master William Herbert lay in his cradle then, he whom you saw yesterday ride so

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swaggeringly by the Queen at the head of a troop. Master Philip was not thought of. How time passes ! My lady lives that golden summer of 1580 over again, I wot, when she comes and paces the walks of the gardens at the Grange or cons her book in its arbours. For her, her famous brother never dies, and she ever keeps his memory green and fresh for others by her diligent editing and revising of his written works ; but that other work, his noble life, needs no such services, for the example it set the world will surely live for ever."

The heroic virtues and shining qualities of Sir Philip Sidney were no unfamiliar theme to me. I had heard my father descant on them so often in the little circle of his Antwerp friends and pupils. He would relate how he had first seen him in the budding flower of his chivalrous youth, when he was making the grand tour, and had rid up to the tall carved house of the printer Weichert in Frankfort, where my father and other students then lodged, to sit at the feet of the great Hubert Languet who abode there ; how the "sweet gravity" and wondrous charms of the gay-clad stripling, perfect in all gallant exercise of the body as in training of the mind, had so pleased the venerable scholar that a friendship had sprung up betwixt them, the old and the young, destined to be close and lasting.

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And though I was but a baby-girl when all Europe wept for the death of the hero of Zutphen, after long agony from wounds gotten there, I never thought of it without a sharp pang, as almost a personal sorrow. I knew by heart some of those elegies which had been poured out by poets and men of letters in a chorus of lamentation for "Astrophel." What marvel then that the sister, to whom this incomparable brother had been more dear than even husband and children, should, after some thirteen years, still feel the keen edge of her grief at the loss of him !

"Never was the tie of blood 'twixt brother and sister so augmented by mutual interests and sympathy," said Master Meredith. "Fain would I have my own children emulate that perfect pair."

"But they, Nat and Ambrosia, are inseparable, and hold each other in greatest dearness, methinks," I said.

"Yes, yes, 'tis true that they love each other well, and are scarce ever apart save when Ambrosia is at her needle, which she plies as indifferently as her pen. They are never so happy as when scouring the country-side together in the wake of my Lord's hounds or breathing in the thyme-scented air of the downs. They envy the shepherds and shepherdesses who pipe their hearts out from morning to night on

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Salisbury Plain. That is all very well. I would not have them eschew exercise which in its proper place Master Ascham upholds, citing how Erasmus's habit was to refresh himself with long rides whenever he had been most sore at his book. What I fear for my children is that neither will ever lead the other into the quiet cloistered paths of learning. They will never willingly wander in academic groves where they may gather the fruit of Plato's and Aristotle's wisdom ; follow the fortunes of heroes mythical and real, in Homer and Tacitus ; and hearken unto the sweet notes of Catullus and Sappho."

Again that sigh escaped Master Meredith's lips, which I had marked when he had first spoken of his children in my hearing outside the Deanery gate. Methought the lines of his gentle countenance hardened with determination as he added—

"Nay, but I do not despair. The boy hath good brains. He shall not grow up a dunce. When Master Massinger, who is steward at Wilton House, sends his Philip to Oxford, Nat shall go thither too, and I have hopes that in the atmosphere of the very seat of learning his mind will put forth tardy shoots."

Whilst he said this Master Meredith took the tendrils of a creeping plant that climbed over the trellis of the porch, and firmly bent them in a direc-

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tion they seemed disinclined to follow. After a struggle one snapped off in his hand.

Young as I was and unversed then in the divers sides of human nature, I felt there was some tragical significance in the bending of the plant, something that foreshadowed what might perchance hap, if Master Meredith should persevere in making a scholar of Nat against his will.

He had just brought me to the pride of his garden, the great Crown Imperial lily, such as grew in the garden of the Sultan of Turkey at Constantinople, when our pleasant converse in the flower-scented air was interrupted by a summons to the breakfast-board.

Ambrosia came to it late, with wild hair and torn kirtle, but a face washed by the May dew till it rivalled the damask roses.

She seated the vixen cub beside her, and called on every one to see how prettily it crossed its fore-paws on the table. The creature, with its soft red eyes and silky nose not yet sharpened into the cunning of mature foxhood, had certainly an extremely winsome and innocent air.

But its appearance was deceptive, Nat said, for Ruby had already breakfasted on a family of young ducklings in a neighbouring farm-yard.

"'Tis not the first offending either. Farmer

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Penfold is raging, and declares it can't go on. 'No matter,' says he, 'how you cozen and pamper a fox 'tis impossible to unfox it,' and we'll have to give Ruby to the hounds after all one of these fine days."

Ambrosia frowned at Nat and looked anxiously at her father, but he was deep in a catalogue the morning post had brought him and heard nought. However, Mrs. Dorcas, who was dispensing ale and cold baked meats to the Rectory servants, amongst whom sat Reuben Windt below the salt, put in a word of sympathy for Farmer Penfold in the loss of his ducklings.

For answer Ambrosia drew the silky head of the vixen to her bosom and covered its snout with passionate kisses.

"Give my angel, my babe, to the hounds. Never!" she murmured through her clenched teeth. "They shall tear me in pieces ere they get you."

"Yet you have been in at the death of her father and grandmother, and would be mighty proud to carry home the brush of any of her brothers and sisters next winter belike."

"That is different. They have not been my own precious babies that I have reared with spoon-meat and cherished in my bosom," retorted Ambrosia. "Ruby shall live with me, I vow, till she is a grey old vixen like her grand-dame."

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Master Meredith glanced up dreamily from his packet.

"Hush, hush," he said. "'Twere prettier manners to speak a little with Mistress Jeanne instead of to argue with each other."

In obedience Ambrosia turned to me and asked defiantly if I liked vixen cubs, and when I made answer I had never known one till now, but methought I should love Ruby well enow as she was indeed so soft and pretty, Ambrosia looked at me more kindly than heretofore.

But I soon lost the steps I had gained towards her good books, for after breakfast we went to the study to read the Greek Testament, and Master Meredith did what I had fain he had forborne from doing. He did verily hold me up as pattern. When I had finished my verses he patted me on the shoulder and said—

"Thou hast the true accent. It brings thy father back to me. Mark well, children, how Jeanne readeth her Greek, with what understanding for the meaning and music of the words. You cannot do better than imitate her."

There was much pouting of curled red lips, shrugging of shoulders and impatient shuffling of feet, as first Nat and then Ambrosia stumbled through those beautiful lines, which are even more unalloyed

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poetry in the Greek than in the English rendering of King James's divines :

“ Consider the lilies of the field ; they toil not, neither do they spin : yet Solomon in all his glory was not arrayed like one of these.”

Master Meredith closed the Testament and was opening Tacitus when Ambrosia burst forth, unable to withhold her impatience. “ Father, hast forgot again? The Queen is at Wilton House, all the world is making holiday, and you promised that we should too. Yet here you are setting us to our tasks as if nothing was happening, as if no guns were being fired, no flags flying, no folk riding in from all the villages round to see the pastoral played, writ by my lady godmother.”

“ Nay, I had not forgot the pastoral. Run then and make yourselves brave in your Sunday clothes, and we shall be ready to start betimes.”

They pushed back their chairs and darted from the room.

“ And you,” said Master Meredith, turning to me, “ you, Mistress Jeanne, methinks will be yet too heavy in spirit to visit gay scenes. You will find many old acquaintances here to console you, I doubt not,” he pointed to the closely-packed book-shelves. “ I could not leave you in more excellent company.”

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I smiled as I read the names on some of the brown leathern covers. Much more familiar to me were the books in Master Meredith's study than the flowers in his garden. I saw at a first glance, Homer, Sophocles, and Euripides, Dante, Petrarch and Ariosto, and, besides those great giants whose genius my father had taught me to hold in reverence, other smaller friends of my lonely childhood, such as Æsop's Fables, The Morte d'Arthur, The Chroniques of M. Froissart, and Painter's 'Palace of Truth.'

And here and there my eye happed on a treasure which I knew my father had wanted and sought for in vain, and at sight of these I could scarce suppress a cry of pleasure. But I durstn't draw Master Meredith into speech about his library, lest he might again forget the actual world and his promise to Nat and Ambrosia.

I watched them from the gate set out for Wilton down the sunlit, blossom-strewn road, for the May breeze shook pink and white showers from the branches of the apple and cherry trees which shaded it on either side. The world indeed was making holiday. Everything quivered and danced as if for joy in the spring, even the flocks of pearly clouds seemed to gambol over the blue sky, like the fleecy lambs in the meadows. The distant hubbub of riotous excitement caused by the presence of the Queen and

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her vast retinue in the neighbourhood broke through the ordinary stillness and peace of the country.

As the tall black figure of Master Meredith walking beside the two fleet forms of his son and daughter disappeared behind the little church and group of smiling cottages, I thought how wondrously the wild beauty and grace of carriage of the pair triumphed over any defects in their village-made bravery. Methought amongst the very lordlings and maids of high degree, assembled yonder in the grounds of Wilton House, surely 'twould be hard to match these two. And then I found myself wondering again why Master Meredith's children resembled him so little.

But before the day was over I had ceased to wonder.

The mystery was made clear when I heard the story of Master Meredith's marriage, which Mrs. Dorcas, unasked, related to me.

IV

MASTER MEREDITH'S MARRIAGE

WHEN I had bid my last farewells to Reuben Windt, who rid back to Salisbury with Luke, the Rector's serving-man, in the afternoon I would fain have been left quiet in the study to hide my tears amongst the quartos and folios.

But Mrs. Dorcas thought to comfort me by saying 'twas not well to mope, and give way to sorrow, and she invited me to sit beside her on the grass plot beneath the beech tree, whither she had taken her spinning wheel into the sunshine.

She was a stout comely dame, in a long stiff woollen bodice and flowered chintz gown, with a bunch of keys at her girdle. It seemed that Mrs. Dorcas was something more than an ordinary confidential servant. She had been nurse and governess to her master's children, and, to the best of her ability, stood in the place of a mother to them.

I saw that it was her inclination to be talkative, and that her favourite topic was those she had served and loved, just as Reuben and Angèle Windt

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could talk of nothing else to strangers, if they talked at all, except of my father and me—supposing that we must be of the same interest to all the world as we were to them.

I never remembered my father to have mentioned his friend's wife, and methought Master Meredith could not have "drawn a picture of her in words," as he had told me that morning that my father had done of his "fair Maid of France."

"Did Mistress Meredith die long ago?"

I asked the question as an opening for Mrs. Dorcas, and she seized upon it eagerly. Her wheel ceased to hum, and she busied her fingers with unwinding her thread from the distaff, as she answered, "What's long ago to the young seems a short time to us who are getting stricken in years. Let me think. Ambrosia was weaned, and Nat was to be breeched Barnabas Day.

'Barnaby bright, Barnaby bright,
Longest day and shortest night.'

"Aye, 'twas on the longest day it happened, the longest day of that year so full of grievous affliction for my master's patroness, the Lady Pembroke, who lost her good father in May, her excellent mother in August; and, crowning sorrow of all, her gallant brother Sir Philip Sidney in October. Yes, 'twas that summer my master suffered his bereavement.

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But look in there and you'd think that it was only yesterday that he had lost her."

She nodded towards a window of the Rectory that opened nearest on to the grass plot. One of the lozenge-paned lattices stood wide, and without getting up I could see distinctly the inside of the dainty chamber.

There, in a blue and white Nankeen jar, were the flowers Master Meredith had plucked so carefully in the early morning. They stood on a little carved table beside the snowy bed, the hangings of which were drawn over the tester. Above the oak bureau hung a mirror in a gold frame wrought about with grapes and vine leaves, and on the top of the bureau sundry jewels, gloves and ribands lay about, as if their owner had forgot to put them away in the drawers. The walls were not hung with tapestries, but a few pictures adorned the wainscot panels, one of which I knew well because 'twas an engraving of Albrecht Dürer's "Death and the Knight," like one that my father had carried about with him always wheresoever he lodged abroad. A bright-hued velvet kirtle bordered with fur was flung over the settle by the hearth, as if it had only lately been worn.

"The chamber is kept locked. Master Rector has the key, but he entrusteth it to me when 'tis necessary to sweep the floor, and strew fresh rushes

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on it. He'll have everything left as 'twas when he found it void that night she went away."

"Then Mistress Meredith did not die here," I exclaimed.

"No, no," said Mrs. Dorcas. "Methinks 'tis as well you should know all about it, else you will certes addle your brains with wondering, and maybe ask Master Rector questions that he would rather not answer."

"He is loth to speak of her, and yet his love for her was so great?"

I could not understand it, for I was sure 'twould ever solace me to speak of my dear dead.

"There are divers kinds of love," said Mrs. Dorcas, "but the strangest, methinks, is that which springeth up in the morning and endeth in a bridal ere nightfall. Dost thou not think that soundeth too sudden to be lucky?"

I scarce knew what to reply. My father had loved my mother, the Huguenot maiden, at first sight, and his wooing had been short, but longer than it seemed Master Meredith's had been.

"Jacob waited for Rachel," Mrs. Dorcas went on; "though maybe he couldn't help it, and perforce was obliged to wait. The more haste to wed, the more leisure to repent. Not that this was a case of repenting, either, on my master's side. He was a bachelor

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of retired ways and quiet tastes, desirous of naught but to do his duty as the shepherd of his little flock here in the country, to spend his spare hours in study and his spare angels on the poor. I warrant that he would have remained unwed to this day had it not been for an accident."

She paused, and wiped her spectacles on her apron.

The shadows lengthened ; the sunlight became more golden ; the swelling fields more vividly green. The air was full of sweet scents and sounds ; distant rooks cawed, pigeons cooed, and a thrush sang in the boughs above us.

There must have been inquiry in my eyes, for Mrs. Dorcas said—

"What accident was it? Well, it happened one winter night, when the weather was very foul. The Rector was summoned to minister to a dying soul far away up in the Downs. He rid back at dawn through the wind and the rain, and as he was nearing home, close here, within his own churchyard gate, he heard a young thing wailing among the tombstones. He got off his horse, went into the churchyard to see who it might be, and found her, a runaway gipsy woman. But no matter what she was, she was beautiful. God never made aught fairer to look on, I trow, than she. She was trembling and shaking with cold and terror, terror of her step-father

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coming after her. He was a high personage amongst the tribe of Egyptian folk who had been camping by Stonehenge since Martinmas. They were no common gipsies, but of pure blood and great wealth, as their proud bearing and gowns of rich velvet and jewels proved. Zdenka (that was her outlandish name) used to ride in steeplechases, and all the countryside would flock to gaze at her; and 'twas because she had refused to ride an ugly-tempered brute, and to marry an old gipsy king who had had three wives already, that her father beat her, and that wild night, when the gipsies moved their camp and the caravans were rolling away, she escaped and flew she knew not whither. 'Twas fortunate for her that a true Christian parson and gentleman like my master stumbled upon her as she cowered there among the tombstones, wet to the skin, and ready to die from exhaustion and fright. I know not exactly what they said to each other. He compassionated her, as he doth all creatures in need and distress, and she had been cruelly used. His gentle look, his tender courtesy, must have given her confidence. She did pray and entreat my master to shield and shelter her, to save her from riding Rufus, and from a dreadful fate. And he said if he gave her shelter it must be for ever; if she wed with him there and then he would have the right to save her. She appeared ready enough. And

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so, as I said, ere night they were made one in the church yonder by my Lord's chaplain, and I and Luke, and Master Massinger, my Lord's steward, were witnesses of, methinks, the strangest wedding as ever was. People talked, of course ; and that a minister of Christ should take to wife an Egyptian woman with such precipitation was the nine days' wonder of the countryside. But more, and worse things withal, would have been said, I warrant, if my lady the Countess and her brother, Sir Philip, had not stood by him, giving their countenance, as it were, to what he had done. 'Tis true, I heard my Lady Pembroke ask the master why he had not thought to put her in the care of Mistress Alice Langton, at the Grange, nigh at hand, meaning she thought that he would have had time then to look round ere he leapt into so hasty a marriage ; and he made answer 'that were she claimed by her tribe there he could not defend her, or keep her from the fate she dreaded, as he could when she was his wife.' But not one of them came to claim her. 'Tis likely that they had travelled a long distance ere they discovered her flight, and then had no clue as to her whereabouts. Be that as it may, they never searched for her in these parts."

Mrs. Dorcas's voice ceased as she set her wheel a-humming. Was I reading deep in some tale of

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Bandello or Boccaccio, curled up in the bowed window overlooking the Market Place at Antwerp, where the square market women sat under green tents behind their eggs and vegetables and pyramids of fruit, and the staid citizens, in their ruffs and short cloaks, passed to and fro, and the squat Flemish children played in the gutter? I almost fancied I could hear the scratch of my father's quill as he plied it on the first chapter of his magnum opus. Alack, 'twas ever the first chapter, for he was never satisfied with it, and never got further. Then my eyes wandered once more through the casement into the little chamber, which now was shrouded in dusky shadows, though the last sun rays still lay without in dazzling brilliance on the grass, and I realized that 'twas a true tale and no romance to which I had been hearkening—one of those true tales which are indeed stranger than fiction.

I waited impatiently for the hum of the wheel to give place once more to the drone of Mrs. Dorcas's tongue, and at last I could no longer refrain from venturing the question—

“Was she—was Mistress Meredith happy?”

“Methinks she had everything to make her happy, and so long as she was ailing and frightened, she seemed to be well content. But when her health mended, and her spirits revived, that which was bred in the bone stirred in her again. She was like some

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caged wild bird spreading its wings for flight. At times the house was not big enough to hold her, and she would wander forth barefooted and bareheaded away over hill and dale up to the high Downs and not come home till the dew fell and the moon was up. In the villages round, 'twas said she had been seen joining hands with the little men in their green jackets and dancing with them in the moonlight, and that when she looked at her face in the pools, the nixies came up from the bottom to have speech with her. She had no love of housewifery ; and though she knew the secret of a few queer cordials and salves, she had no patience to learn 'aught from me, and threw the cookery-book at my head more than once. As for her sewing, the stitches she made were as long as donkeys' legs. If the Countess, who excelleth in broiderie as she doth in penmanship and book-learning, could not interest her in her needle, 'twas not likely that I should have better success. And her singing. If you'd once heard her sing you'd never forget it. 'Twas only in her merriest moods that she was moved to sing, but her outlandish ditties were so wild and so mournful withal, that it near broke your heart to listen to them. She grew mopy and silent before the lad was born, but when he came and her pain was over, her spirits revived again, and she decked herself in gay colours and off she'd go with the baby in her arms on her

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wanderings. 'Twas her nature, and she couldn't help it. 'Twas her nature to be more at home on the open heath or in the forest's depths than in house or garden. And yet she had the carriage of a princess, and walked proudly on her narrow, arched feet. Her hands were small and shapely, her throat slender, and in the spacious drawing-rooms at Wilton, I trow, she never met her peer for beauty of form and face. Welladay. The girl came and the Countess stood gossip to her, and that's how she comes by her long name. There was a little Ambrosia Sidney who died at Ludlow Castle, whose memory the Countess and her beloved brother cherished, the sister and playmate of their youth, whom they had dearly loved and never forgot. 'Twas a hot midsummer-tide, and the sky was lowering and full of threats of storm. I remember the mistress had been playing here beneath the tree with her babes when she called me to see how Ambrosia crowed for kisses. Then suddenly she asked me to mind the children while she went out to see if there was more air away on the Downs than here in Burcombe. First she went into her chamber, and cast off the heavy gown she wore, and put on a calico smock, and tied a handkerchief over her black hair. When she came forth, instead of the jewels she had been wearing, I noticed that she had on again the curiously-wrought long earrings and necklace she

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wore that day the master brought her home as his bride. She waved her hand and smiled over her shoulder at me and the little ones as she passed through the gate and was gone in a twinkling. That was her farewell. She never darkened the doors of the Rectory again. You see her people had come back. There on the grass by Stonehenge, in the shadow of the giant boulders, their tents and caravans were pitched about, and dozens of eyes as dark as hers flashed and burned among the whin bushes, and kerchiefs, red, green and yellow, fluttered on the breeze. The fate she had run away from in terror, from which she had craved the master's protections, so that he, a stranger to her, became her husband the better to protect her—that fate was still awaiting her, and of her own choice she went to meet it. In thunder and lightning she rid some horse bare-backed (I know not whether 'twas the same brute that she had feared to ride before), and in leaping, he threw her on to a stone wall and her neck was broken. She was dead when the master went to seek her. Dead and buried, for the people of her tribe said that she had come back to them of her own free will, and that her body was theirs. They would not give her up for Christian burial, and hurried her under the earth with their own heathen rites. So till this day Master Rector knoweth not the last resting-place of his wife."

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There was another pause, for I had nothing to say, though my thoughts were busy pondering on what I had heard. Then Mrs. Dorcas, peering over her spectacles, admonished me never to speak to Master Meredith of his sorrow.

"People soon forget even tragical mischances," said she, "but he will never forget. He cannot visit her grave, so he hath made *that* room her shrine. 'Twas no bed-chamber, but a parlour, till she was brought to bed there with Nat. Now 'tis both and neither. He will go in there to-night and close the lattice, as he always doth, and in the morning he will go to open it. Every day of the year he does the same, and keeps fresh flowers blooming there. Hast marked how silver-white his hair is? 'Twas not so before. Study and care had mingled a few white threads with the brown, 'tis true, but it took but one single day and night of grief to blanch it altogether, that day he went forth to seek her, and came home without her."

"There are the children," said I. "His children have surely been his comfort."

She shook her head.

"No. Methinks it is in God, in books, flowers, and music and in friendships that he hath found his comfort. Not in his children, certes not in his children. He loves them, but he *will* blind

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himself withal to their nature which they've gotten from their mother and not from him. The lad is his mother's own child, every inch of him, and the maid takes after her brother. Outwardly they are alike as two peas, but at bottom there is this difference 'twixt them—the maid is true as steel, and would scorn a deceitful action. Nat, alack, for all his daring, is not so straight, and methinks might too easily be led into crooked paths by evil company, though God forbid that he shall ever fall in with such."

A rocket whizzed up and spread its golden rain in the evening sky above the dark trees of Wilton, and then the whole park and house were lit up with the pink, blue, and violet glow of Roman fires. Torches flitted hither and thither like fireflies, and again there came wafted through the stillness of the empty hamlet the blaring trumpets and sounds of singing and merriment.

"Lackaday, 'tis waxing late," exclaimed Mrs. Dorcas, "thou must be starving for thy supper, Missy. How I have been chattering the hours away! The play is over and the fireworks beginning. Now the Earl's wine and sack will flow like water, and the merry-makers will sup off roasted oxen, boar-head, and stuffed peacock. The Master would fain be for coming home, methinks, but Ambrosia will not let him speed till the last, I warrant."

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So my thoughts were recalled from dwelling on the story of Master Meredith's curious courtship and marriage and the tragedy of its end to the present-day world in which I had come to live. Yet even it seemed like a dream on that fairy-tale night so full of distant lights and music, though now years and years afterwards it comes back to me with a clearness of detail that is not dreamlike.

"Poor Queen," I said, as we went in to supper, at which Mrs. Dorcas took me up sharply and declared that I was the first she had ever heard pity great and glorious Queen Bess. But I maintained that the Queen was to be pitied, for she had looked wan and pale and ready to drop with fatigue yester-noon when the jollity had scarce begun, so what must she be by now?

"Tut, hunts and masques and mummeries are meat and drink to her. If she lives to a hundred she will never give in, and will liefer go on progressing up and down her kingdom than sit by the fireside. Methinks Her Majesty is one of those who will die standing, but may God Almighty spare her Gracious Majesty's blessed life for many years to come."

Then I asked Mrs. Dorcas if she would not fain have gone to Wilton to see the Queen, and she replied that she had seen her when she had lain there some twenty years ago.

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She might see her on the morrow, which was Sunday, when Her Majesty rid to Salisbury to hear a sermon in the Cathedral from her old chaplain, who was now Lord Bishop of Sarum.

I had been in bed an hour or more when I was awakened from my first slumbers by Ambrosia's voice in the next chamber. She was recounting all the festivities to Mrs. Dorcas, who had come to take her holiday garments to hang them in the frippery.

"The Pastoral was pretty enow. All shepherds and shepherdesses, and nymphs and tritons conversing in fine poetical language," said Ambrosia, "but give me a play by Master Dekker, or one of Master Shakespeare's comedies, such as my Lord's servants played at All Hallows Eve. The people seem real in them, and make you cry and laugh together. Philip Massinger acted a nymph and afterwards he was chagrined when I told him he pleased me better in his womanly garb than in his boy's doublet and hose. He rowed me and Nat about in his father's boat on the river, and we saw all the coloured lights and fireworks reflected in the water. We came nigh to the Queen sitting by the Countess in the silken bower with her lords- and ladies-in-waiting. The Queen hath a nut-cracker chin, Dorcas, like old Mistress Alice Langton's. And in the

Master Meredith's Marriage

Grotto we met Master William Herbert walking with the dark lady, Mrs. Fitton."

"And he had no eyes for any one else, I warrant," Mrs. Dorcas put in, and Ambrosia answered—

"Yes, he looked at me. First he nodded, then he came to where I was standing with Philip, Nat throwing cake crumbs to the gold fish, and he said——"

"Well, what did he say?"

"He said that I grew daily more the image of my mother. 'And my mother,' said he, 'was the fairest woman he had ever seen.' The dark lady heard, for she frowned."

"She would not have frowned, methinks, if she knew that my young Master Herbert when he beheld thy mother counted at most eight years."

"Yea, but think of the scores of beautiful ladies he hath seen since then, and still he thinks my mother was the fairest. I am glad I am like my mother, Dorcas. Good-night."

Dorcas murmured "Beauty is skin deep," as she took away the candle, and the only response that came from Ambrosia's pillows was a sleepy gurgling laugh.

V

SIDNEY'S SISTER

MAYBE I have lingered too long on the details of my first coming to Master Meredith's.

In recalling the past, the entering on what has been a new phase in our lives is apt to stand out with more clearness than the weeks and months and years that have rolled on unmarked by novelty for us personally, though they may have been full of changes and significance for the larger world outside our own.

And now I come to speak of my first meeting with the most gracious and sweetest of great ladies, whom had I never known methinks I should never have sat down to write these records, in which I have no design to play the part of a heroine, but rather that of the looker-on, or, as it were, of the chorus in the Greek plays.

In truth 'twas my long acquaintance with and sometimes nearness to her who is ever held in dear and precious remembrance as "Sidney's sister" which gave me the chance of seeing and hearing much

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that my memory has retained into old age, so that I, having always been ready with my pen, have felt tempted to chronicle my recollections thereof.

The Queen's visit was over and the fair May-time had ripened into as fair a June, when one morning a servant wearing the badge with a dragon on it of the Pembrokes came to the Rectory with a message from the Countess. The burden of it was that Master Meredith was to take me, "little Mistress Jeanne Trefusis," over to the Grange, whither my lady was coming to visit Mistress Langton and to spend some hours in the old garden that held for her so many fond and hallowed memories.

Nat and Ambrosia had gone on one of those long excursions over the downs on which they had not yet asked me to bear them company. Already methought Nat would fain have had me go with them, but dared not invite me for fear of vexing his sister. I had been deep in turning into Latin verse one of Sir Philip Sidney's sonnets that he had written to Stella, the poetic name of Lady Penelope Devereux ere she became unhappily wed to the Lord Rich.

Though so well acquainted with the *Arcadia* and *The Apologie for Poesie*, which my father when he had read it to me said was as spirited as a clarion-

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call, the sonnets were new to me. I found them of wondrous interest, like to Petrarch's to his Laura, and it was from pure delight in the beauty of the verse that, whilst Master Meredith writ his Sunday sermon, I set myself the task of translating—

“Come, sleep ! O sleep, the certain knot of peace,
The baiting place of wit, the balm of woe ;
The poor man's wealth, the prisoner's release,
Indifferent judge between the high and low.

.
Take thou of me smooth pillows, sweetest bed,
A chamber deaf of noise and blind of light,
A rosy garland and a weary head :
And if these things, as being thine in right,
Move not thy heavy grace, thou shalt in me
Livelier than elsewhere Stella's image see.”

Master Meredith had looked over my shoulder once to see what I was about, and had praised my work. I liked well to hear his words of praise when Nat and Ambrosia were not by. Then the message from the Countess came, and the Rector rose quickly and bid me follow him to the house over the road. But at first I shrank behind my book, feeling shy and somewhat alarmed now the summons had really come. Yet I was not unprepared for it, as Master Meredith had said several times that Lady Pembroke would certainly desire to see soon the daughter of Jack Trefusis, whose

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scholarship had been admired by her illustrious brother.

"Come, come! Thou hast nothing to fear," Master Meredith said. "My lady will not eat you. Give me your Latin verses and we will show them to her, and she will be pleased, I warrant, at your choice of Sir Philip's sonnet."

I folded the written sheets and handed them to him; but he laid them down whilst he brushed his doublet, and forgot to take them up again, so we set forth without them.

The June sky was cloudless blue above us and the sunlight lay hot on the white road as we crossed it, but within the iron gate, on either side of which crouched two lions on pillars in carven stone, the shaded alley of yew leading to the front of the house was dark and cool. The little green casements seemed to blink a friendly welcome through the climbing roses and honeysuckles in which they were so thickly wreathed. In the long border under the windows bloomed sweet-johns, gillyflowers, and columbines, and their sweet perfume filled the long, low-ceilinged chamber, half hall, half parlour, with buff walls and faded tapestry hangings, where aged Mistress Alice Langton was awaiting the Countess's visit and ours.

Mistress Alice was very old, deaf, shrivelled, and

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toothless, but there was still a bright intelligence in her soft, dim brown eyes, and a quiet, stately dignity in her manner withal. As is often the case with those who have outlived their generation, her mind was much more occupied with a long-vanished past than with the things of the present, albeit she still tended the bees in the golden hives and the pigeons that fluttered in and out of the octagonal dovecote, with its pointed slate roof standing tall against the sky. She and her rosy-cheeked handmaidens kept the house, too, in spotless order.

The heavy, dark presses and bureaux were polished till you could see your face in them, and not a fleck of dust clung to the tapestry, which told the story of Actæon and the chaste Diana, set in a border of mythical birds and beasts. The colours may have been bright once, but time had paled them into soft tints of sea-green and greyish blue.

Mistress Alice would converse long and often, Master Meredith said, of the old monastic days, and especially of that fateful eve of the Annunciation when the Lady Abbess of Wilton had told her nuns that on the morrow they must forth from their cloister to wander, like Hagar, in the wilderness. The fair-haired, brown-eyed little novice,

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Sister Alice, had wept and lamented with the rest ; and no wonder, for within the stone walls of the old grey monastery she had first learned to lisp her Latin prayers and orisons from the good nuns ; and then afterwards, when she had sought it as a refuge from earthly care and misfortune, of which she had early had sad experience, it became her only home.

Most strange it seemed that one living should be able to remember those towers and pinnacles and cloisters, and the heavy-grated gates, within which the nuns had glided to and fro from their cells to the chapel, from the chapel to the almonry, where they relieved the poor, and laid salves on the sores of beggars. In sooth they had led holy lives and done good works. Yet when the stream of enlightenment swept away idolatry and the hydra-headed evils which had grown up in the Church, they, innocent victims, had to go too. Methought Mistress Alice Langton, as her dim eyes looked towards the park of Wilton, saw the monastery still standing there as it stood ere a stone of Hans Holbein's noble dwelling had been laid, and perchance there sounded in her aged ears the long silent chapel bell, the chanting of matins and vespers, and the organ's rich rolling notes.

Some word from Master Meredith had led old Mistress Alice to speak of the past, in which the

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nearer she drew to the grave she did live the more, when my Lady Pembroke, in company of the Earl's physician, Dr. Moffat, and two or three of her young gentlewomen, came over the sward towards the house. In another moment the little party had entered and I was face to face with her whom all poets adored as a second Minerva, who had been compared with Octavia, the sister of Augustus, Virgil's patroness ; of whom Master Spenser, king of poets, then only a short time dead, had writ as the ornament of woman-kind, "Urania, sister unto Astrophel," saying that she resembled her brother in "shape and spright," and that his goodly image lived in the divine resemblance of her face.

I cannot say whether I thought of all this on first beholding the lovely lady, or remembered to have heard that as Lady Mary Sidney, before she became the Earl of Pembroke's wife, she too had adorned Queen Elizabeth's splendid Court, of which her brother had been the chief ornament and glory. Belike, I was too taken up with marking her charm and beauty of person to think of anything else.

Hers was beauty that fadeth not with years, for it was the beauty of soul shining through the flesh which gave to her face that wondrous brilliancy, often lacking in the most perfect features. 'Twas ever to be so with my lady. Time, instead of bringing coarseness

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and furrows, did only seem to etherealize and render more transparent the outward setting of the precious jewel within—as if the body became more and more subordinate to the spirit.

The Countess was then, when I first saw her, mother of a son of over twenty years, and had borne many griefs, besides that crowning bereavement which had taken from her and the world her gallant brother in the prime of his chivalrous manhood. Yet there was the liveness of girlhood in her step and form. Her amber hair hung in bright curls round the somewhat long oval of her face, delicate in hue as flushed ivory. Her clear hazel eyes, fringed with silken lashes of a darker brown than her hair, albeit they were grave in repose, sparkled with animation whilst she talked. There was a warmth in her smile and voice that methought would have melted the iciest heart, and have put the gauchest at their ease.

I remember how she was appareled that day in yellowish white, the colour of curds, rich though simply fashioned. She wore no stiff ruff, but a spreading collar as fine as a cobweb, scarce raised from the shoulders. Her only jewel was the pearl clasp with drops that fastened a drooping feather in her brown hat. The gloves she drew from her long white hands were exquisitely embroidered and laced, and perfumed like Arabia.

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The Countess would not let Mistress Alice stand, but pushed her with gentle playfulness into her tall-backed arm-chair again, where, bending over her with her lips laid close to Mistress Alice's wimple that she might hear her the better, she inquired if the bees had swarmed, and whether the fledglings had taken their first flight from the dovecot, and of other matters that might seem merely trifling save to the old woman to whom they were doubtless of import.

Then she turned to me, and Master Meredith broke off his converse on chemistry with Dr. Moffat, whose large bullet-head was covered with a wig, matching his heavy overhanging eyebrows. I have never forgotten how brightly she smiled at me that day as she greeted me. Her first words were about my father, which made me blush with pleasure, and then she went on to speak of the manuscript.

"I have heard already," said she, "of the arrival in Salisbury of a little traveller, bearing in her arms the *Scipio's Dream* of Tully. Now, dear Master Meredith, you have shown me one of the treasures you have taken under your roof, the scholar's daughter. Where is the other?"

"Ah, I should have brought it too, the manuscript, your ladyship, but forgot. I crave your pardon for my faulty memory. If Doctor Moffat hath any panacea therefor, I vow I'll try it, late in the day

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though it be. And, my lady, the child is not only a scholar's daughter, but a scholar herself. The Latin verse she writ this noon, for a pastime more than a task, would delight you, methinks. Nay, have I forgot that too?" Master Meredith added after a search in all his pockets, "Pardon again, I have forgot the paper. She chose a passage from *Astrophel*."

"*Astrophel*. Is she so familiar with the works of *Astrophel*!" exclaimed the Countess in a voice so tender and musical it set the chords of my heart vibrating.

I would fain have said I had only known the sonnets since I came to Burcombe, unlike the *Arcadia* which I had read over and over again in my Antwerp home, but they were all looking at me, and I turned shy and could not speak. Not that it was Master Meredith's affectionate gaze, nor the glance of sympathy and interest in the Lady Pembroke's eyes that made me feel awkward. 'Twas Dr. Moffat's prominent orbs bent on me, beneath his bushy brows, and the group of young gentlewomen who stared at me from the recess behind Mistress Alice's chair, methought somewhat incredulously as if loth to believe so silent a person could be so clever as Master Meredith would have made out.

Noting my embarrassment, the Countess changed

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the subject from myself to sonnets. She spoke of Master Daniel, her son's old tutor, having just printed his "Delia" sonnets, with a dedication of course to her ladyship his late patroness—it seemed that every one dedicated his works to her.

"'Tis the commonest form of verse writing," said she. "Belike Mistress Jeanne hath tried her hand at exercises of original sonnet writing."

'Twas true I had, and at some small roundels and lyrics which none save my father had seen, but I did not say so, and Lady Pembroke went on.

"Yester morning my son Will read me some half-dozen sonnets, not in print, but in the handwriting of the great player Will Shakespeare, of whose friendship he is so proud. As in his dramas he doth surpass all others, so in these sonnets Master Shakespeare shows his supreme genius. Such rhythmic perfect lines, each pregnant with some great thought or fine image! He is the master-poet, the master-mind amongst us. None can equal him."

So I heard first mention of the famous sonnets writ to Mr. W. H. some years before they were printed within the covers of a book. Master Meredith inquired after Mr. William Herbert's health, for 'twas said he had been suffering so severely from headache, that on Dr. Moffat's advice he had not gone back with the Queen's retinue to London.

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"The pain troubles him continuously," Lady Pembroke said with a look of deep concern. "Our good Doctor hath prescribed for him rest and quiet, and so he will tarry with us at home for the summer and autumn. I rejoice much at the thought of having his company for so long, though the cause is one to lament."

"No pills or potions of mine do Mr. Herbert any good," said the old physician; "his only ease is in Raleigh's physic, tobacco smoke."

"And it must be one particular kind," the Countess said. "I have writ to his uncle Robert in Flanders to send more of it."

I need not record more of the talk that went on in that low, cool room in the presence of the aged whilom nun, as faded, though living, as the tapestry figures of Diana and her nymphs, which the breeze coming through the open lattices swayed gently to and fro against the walls.

A move was soon made to the dairy, where the young gentlewomen of her household who had come to the Grange with the Countess, went to watch the churning. The dairymaid stopped in her song at the sound of rustling silk on the shining red-tiled floor.

"I see you have witch-hazel over the door, Betsy," Lady Pembroke said. And Betsy explained that

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it had been nailed there since last St. Helen's Day to keep witches and goblins out of the dairy. I had never heard of such a provision against witchcraft, though the Flemish peasants, methought, could not be out-done by those of Wilts for superstition and queer practices.

"The cream hath not been bewitched again, your ladyship, since we put up the witch-hazel," Betsy said. "Before there was an evening when the butter would not come for hours. We churned till our arms near came off, and still the butter wouldn't come till we had chanted the Psalms through from beginning to end."

"That must have taken you all night, Betsy," laughed the Countess. And as she put on her mask and led the way from the shadowed twilight of the dairy on to the sunlit pleasance where the hives stood and the bees were humming among the sweet-johns, Master Meredith said, "It took you and your brother Sir Philip Sidney more than one night, my lady, to render the Psalms into metrical verse. I often wonder if we are ever to see the fruits of your labours in print."

She shook her head.

"No, I warrant not. There is too much of mine, too little of his in the version for me to wish to see it published. And may I ask, dear Master Meredith,

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when your great opus is to see the light ? The work which all your friends, knowing the rich store of learning you have to draw on, have long been looking for."

"Please, my lady," Master Meredith said with a sigh, "do not speak of what as yet doth but exist in your too kind imagination. There is no opus ; I still glean materials, and not a line hath been writ."

"But it should be, Master Meredith, it should be. Once make a beginning, and it will grow apace," urged the Countess, almost impatiently.

We had now come by an alley overarched by climbing rose and honeysuckle to a leafy arbour, a kind of umbrageous temple, held aloft by pillars and adorned with statues. The rest of the party had taken another path, and so we three were alone.

The Countess laid her hand in the wondrous wrought, scented glove on my shoulder—

"Little Mistress Jeannie, studious child, thou must see to it that Master Meredith begins his book. He can write fine prose, for all his modesty, a prose that rivalleth judicious Hooker's, and he hath the power, if he would but use it, to produce a great book, one that will live."

I could see by his face that Master Meredith was sensitive on the topic of that great unwritten book of

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his. Methought none but the Countess would have ventured to rally him on it.

Should I then ever take courage to do what the Countess charged me, and try to prevail with my guardian to begin his great work? While I hesitated she spoke again earnestly.

"Promise, little scholar, promise to inspire and help our good Master Meredith."

And I looked up at her and met her shining eyes as she stood on the steps beneath the honeysuckle arch, the sunlight glinting through it burnishing the tresses of her hair with gold. I was overwhelmed with the strange, sudden worship for a much older woman, which often takes possession of the heart and soul of a very young girl. From that moment I would have done anything in the world for her, even to cutting off my right hand. To be near her was to feel the presence of the romantic figure of the long-dead hero-poet, whom I had never seen in the flesh, but had pictured a thousand times in my childish dreams, painting him in such fair colours that he lived to me as the very mirror and ideal of all manly beauty and perfection.

'Twas no effort to realize that this was Sidney's sister, she seemed so completely the twin-spirit and feminine counterpart of my vision of what the noble Sir Philip had been.

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Master Meredith had turned away on the pretext of examining a flower, and she and I were alone together. All my shyness sped. She drew me within the shade of the little leafy temple, and I promised I would do aught that was in my power to influence Master Meredith to begin his opus. I poured out how it grieved me to think that my father had died with his scarce begun. How he had writ and rewrit that first chapter of Virgil's life, searching always for choicer words, and so ill-content therewith that he had never got any further.

"Master Meredith's design," the Countess said, "is to write the lives, not of one but of all, the poets, ancient and modern, since Homer. He hath been 'gleaning,' as he puts it, for this vast plan ever since I knew him. 'Tis high time he started to put it into execution."

Indeed it was, thought I, for if Master Meredith died without having set down a line of his great book his case would be even more sad than my father's. I glanced round the small rustic room. In one corner was a table on which lay inkhorn, quills, and parchment. "Was it here," I asked, "that Sir Philip sometimes wrote,—where Pyrocles and Musidorus, Philoclea and Pamela came to life?"

"Yes, in part, some of those sheets over which his pen glided so easily, too easily belike, were turned off

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here. But the idea came to him first pacing the three-fold avenue on the hillside in the park. The cedars and beeches whispered the story to him, and a great part of it was written at quiet old Ivy Church Manor, yonder, on the other side of Salisbury, where he and I tarried together; as fair a spot as this, the house standing on a breezy, grassy hill surrounded by woods, and fields enamelled with all sorts of eye-pleasing flowers. And as from Wilton we see the cathedral rising framed in the trees, so from Ivy Church is seen the stately spire from another aspect of equal beauty rising at the end of an undulating vista of green."

I delighted much to hear the Countess converse thus of Arcadia, that Arcadia which was her very own domain, though all the world had wandered in it.

"There was no casting about for the choicest words and expressions with Philip," she continued. "They flowed in so great luxuriance that he always said, 'Arcadia would need a mighty pruning,' and it fell to my share to use the pruning-knife. But I wonder why I talk like this to you, as if you had known him, you who were scarce born at the time of his passing."

"I have known him—I know him still," I exclaimed with a sudden outburst of eloquence. "I have seen him as the Italian Paolo Veronese painted him, as my father saw him riding up so gallant and gay to the house in Frankfort, where the great scholar, his

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friend Hubert Languet, lodged. My father had the power of making me see things with his eyes, else I should not know so well the image of my sweet mother who died in her fair youth when I was a babe. Yes, my lady, I have known him, and I know him still, for have you not yourself said it that he can never die?"

And then in the flush of my excitement with a boldness that surprised myself I quoted from her own charming elegy "The Doleful lay of Clorinda"—

"But that immortal spirit which was decked
With all the dowries of celestial grace
By sovereign choice for the heavenly choirs select,
And lineally derived from angels' race.
Oh! what is now of it become aread?
Ah me! can so divine a thing be dead?"

Ah no! it is not dead, nor can it die,
But lives for aye, in blissful Paradise,
Where, like a new-born babe it soft doth lie,
In bed of lilies wrapped in tender wise
And compassed all about with roses sweet
And dainty violets from head to feet."

.
There lieth he in everlasting bliss,
Sweet spirit never fearing more to die,
Nor dreading harm from any foes of his,
Nor fearing salvage beasts more cruelty;
Whilst we here, wretches, wail his private lack
And with vain vows do often call him back.

But live thou there, still happy, happy spirit,
And give us leave thus here thee to lament.

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Not thee that dost thy heaven's joy inherit,
But our own selves that here in dole are dreant,
Thus do we weep and wail and wear our eyes,
Mourning in others our own miseries."

Several times I had paused, but had been bid by a soft "Go on" from her to proceed, and having come to the end she laid both hands on my shoulders and kissed me on the brow.

"What a memory thou hast, dear child, and what a low, well-tuned voice. Methinks thou wilt be a God-send to Master Meredith, as a friend for his wild Ambrosia, who has never had a girl playmate."

"Ambrosia wants none but Nat," said I, for the Countess's friendly graciousness towards me had so broken down my reserve that I was ready to reveal to her even this little private trouble. For it did trouble me very sorely that Ambrosia still excluded me from any share in hers and Nat's pursuits, and acted as if she held me to be more the fitting companion for her father and Mrs. Dorcas than her own.

"Has my madcap god-daughter not made you welcome at Burcombe?" questioned Lady Pembroke. "Aye, 'tis froward of her if that is so; but she will think better of it soon. The maid hath a good heart. You and she must come together to my broiderie lesson next week at Wilton."

And now Master Meredith came back and we

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heard drawing near the laughter of the gentlewomen who had been losing themselves in the paths converging on the arbour which was the centre of a sort of maze. The Countess, with one more affectionate glance at the table with the ink-horn and quills upon it, stepped out again into the full sunlight, and my sweet discourse with her was ended for that day. Maybe I love to recall it with distinctness and every word she spoke, because it was the opening, the prelude, as it were, to my long intimacy with her, which lasted over many years of divers changes and sorrows, but which for me was ever a source of pure, dear joys and highest happiness.

VI

IN SIR PHILIP'S AVENUE

IT was not for some weeks after, that I next saw the Countess of Pembroke. The broidering lesson was deferred owing to Master William Herbert's malady of headache becoming worse, so that his mother was taken up with tending him.

The roses and clove pinks were in full bloom and a crimson hollyhock in blossom in Master Meredith's garden when the latch of the Rectory garden clicked, and a second time came a servant, clad in the blue livery with the Pembroke wyvern on his badge, bearing a message from the Countess.

Ambrosia and I got ready at once, and Nat bore us company, saying he was going to fish for trout with Philip Massinger in the Nadder whilst we were being instructed in tent and cross-stitch. His rods and tackle were slung over his shoulder and a wide-brimmed hat pulled over his brow.

Ambrosia looked at the sturdy young angler with envy and began to swing the work-bag which hung on her arm contemptuously.

In Sir Philip's Avenue

"I would fain be going a-fishing too," said she. "I can keep quiet enough standing knee-deep in the reeds and sedges on the river bank, waiting for the tug of a silver trout, but my legs *will* get fidgety creeps when I have to sit perforce mum and proper with a needle in my hand. It begins in my fingers and runs down my back and spreads all over me, till at last I can scarce forbear to jump up and skip and play at leap-frog over the Ladies Anne and Rosamund and the rest of them as they bend so diligently over their frames. Their hands are lily-white, and how the rings sparkle on their fingers when they thread their needles! But look at my hands."

She held forth one of them, slim and finely-shaped but tanned by the sun to a tawny orange.

"If your hand was so brown as that, Dove, would you not be shamed to dally with a needle in gentle company?"

The formality of addressing me as Mistress Jeanne had by this time been dropped by my companions at the Rectory. It was Nat who had given me the name of Dove the day we went to the sheep-shearing feast at Farmer Penfold's. Ambrosia joined in the country folks' dancing, and whilst I stood watching, Nat came to my side and said that midst all the rainbow hues and the country lads and lasses, I, in my grey stuff

In Sir Philip's Avenue

gown and white muslin cap, looked like a little ring-dove.

"I know now what 'tis you have reminded me of from the first," he had said, "with your soft round eyes and cooing voice. 'Tis a dove, I shall call you Dove." And Ambrosia too had fallen into the habit of calling me by the name Nat had given me, though she said nicknames were foolish.

We entered the park by a stile at the end of some fields. It was a private footway which brought us out on the highest slopes, and I paused in ecstasy at the near sight of the great trees, at this point growing so densely together that it was like being in the heart of some great forest. Far, far above our heads was the rustling canopy formed by the interlacing boughs of those mighty beeches with their silver-grey boles of satin smoothness. I thought of Virgil's lines about the beech tree and of how different were the rows of scant Flemish poplars—the trees my eyes had been long accustomed to before I came to England. And further on were perfumed limes and wide-spreading cedars with more space betwixt them to cast their shadows in dark patterns on the emerald turf. Herds of spotted deer cropped the grass and eyed us shyly as we passed. The turrets and bays of the great house, lying below in the valley with rising ground

In Sir Philip's Avenue

behind it, looked dream-like and far away in the shimmering summer haze, with the silver river winding like a big serpent through its terraced gardens and pleasancess.

Ambrosia said she would fain roll down the steep smooth slopes that we were descending, but fell to running instead. For a moment we lost sight of her behind another line of stately trees, then she came back a few paces and said excitedly—

“Master William Herbert is coming along yonder, under the trees. He readeth aloud poetry to a gentleman, one of my godmother's learned guests, perchance. This is Sir Philip's Avenue, and none who come hither will willingly brook being disturbed, methinks. Come, let us hide till he hath gone by.”

She pulled Nat and me close against a great trunk which hid us from view.

Very slowly, often pausing in their walk, the two figures advanced along the grassy way. The taller and younger I recognized as Mr. Herbert whom I had seen with his father and brother attending the Queen in splendid array. To-day he was in *négligé* garb of sombre-hued velvet, yet withal his carriage was of such noble magnificence that one could not help associating him, even in this solitary avenue, with garlands and tapestry hangings floating from windows and chivalric accoutrements.

In Sir Philip's Avenue

One hand was laid on his forehead, in the other he held a paper that looked like a letter.

"And hearken to this, Master Daniel," said he as they came to a halt near where we hid, and he read in a voice which had the same clear sweet ring in it as the Countess's—

"Thou art thy mother's glass, and she in thee
Calls back the lovely April of her prime :
So thou through windows of thine age shalt see,
Despite of wrinkles, this thy golden time.
But if thou live, remember'd not to be,
Die single, and thine image dies with thee."

"Aye, in praising you then, he doth turn a pretty compliment to the fairest and most excellent of ladies," said his old tutor.

"Will not these when complete be a finer galaxy of love-sonnets than Petrarch's or my sainted Uncle Philip's?" asked Master Herbert. "I fancy I hear his spirit answer yea a thousand times, as we pace this grove which his body so often haunted."

"It must be so with aught that comes from that miracle Will Shakespeare," the other said. "We know that it will transcend everything and outlive the world. Let me see," and he took the paper from Master Herbert's hand. "'Tis marvellous! No evidence of dire cudgellings here for metre and rhyme, not a single erasure or a line blotted. He warbles his deepest thoughts and lightest conceits alike with the

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same ease as doth yonder thrush its liquid shower of trills."

They moved on along the path of chequered shade and sunlight, and then the anxiety Ambrosia had shown to remain hid gave place to an opposite impulse which made her dart forward and cross the grass in front of the two sauntering gentlemen. When on the other side, she stood still beneath a copper beech. The rare crimson glow of its wondrous foliage heightened the brilliant colouring of her face, as she turned it over her shoulder laughing, and seemed to beckon us to follow her. Master Herbert again stopped, and his pencilled brows, which a moment before had been contracted with the suffering in his head, were raised in surprise.

"A wood-nymph," he exclaimed; "a beautiful wood-nymph. Beckoning to some young faun to come and sport with her."

Ambrosia did not change her position at these words, as if she liked very well to be thought a wood-nymph. But Master Daniel said—

"Methinks 'tis the good Rector of Burcombe's daughter. Truly, she favours him not, but is be-like her late mother's image, though I never saw her."

"Ah, Mistress Ambrosia!" exclaimed Master Herbert, as if only then recognizing her. "The namesake of the little aunt with golden hair, who flitted about

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the grey feudal precincts of old Ludlow Castle like some bright butterfly years ere I was born. Mistress Ambrosia, how do you and your pet vixen fare?"

He doffed his cap with a courtly air. His eyes, I noticed, were of that uncommon dark blue which reminded me of the gentians I had once seen growing on snowy mountain sides, when I had stayed for a while with my father in an Alpine village. And as Master Herbert looked at Ambrosia with those deep blue eyes a world of expression lay in them, which, alack, she was not too young to understand.

"I and Jeanne Trefusis are on our way to my lady's broidering," she said, as if explaining our intrusion into Sir Philip's avenue, "and Nat is going to angle whilst we sew."

He turned, and seeing Nat, exclaimed—

"I knew there was a faun not far off; he and the wood-nymph make a pretty couple. Nat, when I go back to court I'll take you with me as my page, if you will come."

"Oh, sir, I am too old to begin being a page now," Nat said, casting down his eyes till his long black silken lashes swept his cheek, "and," he hesitated, "I want to go to sea."

"Of course. That great thirst for the sea comes on most boys at your age, but your scholarly father will be cherishing other designs for your future, I don't doubt."

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Nat frowned, knowing well what these designs were, and how distasteful they were to his active nature.

When we were nearing the house, and stood a minute on the slender ivy-covered bridge which spanned the river, to look down into the clear dimpling water, Ambrosia breathed an extravagant sigh.

"Oh, Nat, Nat," she said, "what an offer thou hast refused! How fain would I be a page, and go to London with Master Herbert."

"That means you would like to leave Burcombe, and father, and Ruby, and me, for love of Master Herbert," said Nat, putting down his basket and disentangling his tackle.

"No, it doesn't. *Like* to leave *you*, Nat! I hate the thought of ever being separated from you. You know as well as I do I can never be happy without you. But whether you go to Oxford or to sea, I can't go with you. Oh, why was I born a maid?"

She leapt on the parapet of the bridge, and threw up her arms towards the blue sky, as if she were protesting with heaven against her sex.

Nat pulled her down.

"Stupid! If you were not a girl, Master Herbert would not make eyes at you as he did just now, and

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you would be sorry. You and Dove will be late, so hasten away, and send out Philip Massinger."

As Ambrosia and I were about to pass through the lofty library to reach the gallery, a boy, with a grave, sallow face, looked up from a folio which he had drawn on to his knee from one of the shelves where he sat perched. This was the Philip Massinger, son of the Earl's steward, whose name I had heard so often since I came to the Rectory, but had not seen before.

"Mooning amongst the old tomes, as usual," Ambrosia said to him. "Nat is waiting for you on the bridge, but you don't look much like going fishing, Master Philip."

The boy swung his feet in buckle shoes dexterously on to the floor, and gave a shy bow as he said—

"I was looking up a saying of Archimedes for Master Francis, who is at work on his manuscript in her ladyship's Areopagus."

Afterwards, I learned that the Areopagus was the name given to a very pleasant and spacious apartment up-stairs, with as fair a view from its windows as any in the house, where those poor scholars and authors who had known Sir Philip Sidney, or could boast having enjoyed his patronage in the past, were made welcome by his generous sister to pursue their literary studies. Desks stood in the embrasures of the win-

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dows, with paper, quills, and rare books laid upon them; and in the Countess's Arcopagus many a poet whose inspiration had languished under the pinch of poverty felt it revive, and was able to produce some work which he may have despaired of accomplishing in a London lodging, harassed by cares and duns. Yes, worthy recipients there were indeed of the extraordinary bounty and goodness of the Châtelaine of Wilton House. But there were others, 'tis not to be gainsaid, equally unworthy, who turned to small purpose the advantages they claimed on the ground, often somewhat mythical, of old acquaintance with Sir Philip, and did but use them to fatten in a comfortable and idle dependence. Philip Massinger, with his taste for learning and quick wits, was allowed by the Earl to browse in the library as he listed, and he was often in request to make researches there for the gentlemen who might not wish to leave their desks. Yet, when once roused from his book, Philip loved out-door sports as well as any other lad, and he could ride, and row, and fish, and hunt the otter and badger with the best.

I remember how Philip Massinger looked at Ambrosia when she commanded him imperiously to leave Archimedes, and go to Nat on the bridge. The secret of his boyish heart leapt into his eyes, and the eyes of the country lad were every whit as

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eloquent as Master William Herbert's, the man of the world.

"Are you not coming to fish, too?" he asked, wistfully.

"Not to-day," she answered, in doleful tones, and led me on to the other end of the library.

VII

MISTRESS JEANNE AND THE COUNTESS

I WOULD fain have lingered to feast my eyes on the long regiments of books, in their mellow tints of brown with the sunlight illuminating the gold fleur-de-lys and lettering of their titles, but Ambrosia hurried me on.

Once only she stopped after we had spoken to Philip Massinger. That was to point to the portrait of the first Earl of Pembroke, hanging above the high carved chimney-piece of the open hearth. It was a tall, burly, sinewy figure, in black velvet and silver, a tiny dog with bushy tail curvetting at his feet.

"Couldst believe *that* was Master William Herbert's grandsire?" Ambrosia asked; "he hath more the air of a farmer than a courtier. He could not read or write, but King Hal held him in great esteem withal, and that little cur so loved him, that when my Lord died the dog laid himself down beneath his hearse, and died too of a broken heart."

We mounted the wide staircase to the gallery, and on the way saw in a closet which opened off it, Dr.

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Moffat busy dissecting insects. His big head was bowed and he did not raise it as we went by. Master Meredith had told me that the Countess much delighted in making experiments in chemistry with the old physician, and I wondered that she could find time for this too in addition to all her duties as mistress of the vast household and the labours of her pen. My wonder at her divers powers was yet greater when I beheld what she had wrought with her needle.

Besides much marvellous fine and dainty work on linen, she had made, with her gentlewomen's help, tapestry pictures, wherewith a whole chamber was hung. With joy I looked on them when I first beheld them, and never wearied of their prospect in the years to come. For there were the figures that had come forth from the imagination of the poet soldier under the trees of Wilton, to people his famous romance, portrayed by his sister's skilled hand in a thousand coloured silks and golden threads framed in the panels of the wall. There were the two shipwrecked princes, twin flowers of courtesy and chivalry ; and the ugly Mopsa, and the shepherds Claius and Strephon. There was Musidorus fighting for the Arcadians against the Helots, and finding his lost friend heading the rebels ; a scene of plunging horses and hurtling spears—and so the pictures went on following the two heroes

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through their manifold adventures and disguises in the realms of King Basilius and his wicked Queen Gynecia, whose daughters, beautiful Pamela and Philoclea, were wooed through such a tangled maze of difficulties and contretemps as was surely never before set the reader to unravel.

The chamber of which I speak opened from the great gallery on the southern side, and looked away over the gardens and river to those highest slopes of the park, by which we had descended into it. The Countess spent much of her time here, and it was here she received Ambrosia and me that afternoon, though her ladies were already grouped in the bay at the head of the long gallery with their frames and workbags and skeins of silk. The French broidress was moving from one to the other to superintend the lesson.

"Come, little Jeanne," my lady said; "I would fain that you should see some of my own special books and treasures," and she led me to a cabinet and showed me a miniature of Sir Philip, in which the countenance was of great sweetness and the figure of a surpassing grace. He wore a tall-crowned hat and reclined in the shade of a tree with a book in his hand.

"His fairest likeness in youth," said she, "was painted on his travels by the great Italian Titian, and was sent to Penshurst on the death of M. Languet for whom it was done. But the original was beyond all painting."

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And then she showed me a lock of his hair which was of the same bright hue as her own, though more inclining to red, and beside it was one of the Queen's tresses given to the ornament of her court at the moment he stood highest in her favour. It was long and auburn too, but without lustre, and if it had not grown on the head of a Queen might have been called sandy.

“And here, little book-lover, maybe these volumes will interest you.” The Countess ran her white jewelled fingers along a shelf in the deep window-seat. There was ranged each edition of the *Arcadia* as it had appeared, *The Defence of Poesie*, *Astrophel and Stella*, and with them her own translations of M. Plessis du Mornay's *Discourse of Life and Death*, which Master Gabriel Harvey called an electuary of gems, and the French tragedy *Antonie*, to which she had added choral lyrics. I turned the leaves of the first edition of Master Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, and saw writ in the author's handwriting, “To the Noble and Virtuous Gentleman most worthy of all titles, both of learning and chivalry—Master Philip Sidney.” And on the fly-leaf of the small Greek Testament in which the Countess had read verse and verse with her brother in their childhood's days at Ludlow, was a specimen of Sir Philip's boyish penmanship.

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"He writ a clearer and less cramped hand then than later," she said. "We laughed together often over his fantastic hieroglyphics, and pitied the poor copyists who would have the task of deciphering them. See this first page of all. 'Tis plain and fair compared with some, yet methinks thou couldst scarce read a word didst thou not know it already in print."

'Twas true that the characters were grotesquely shaped, small and niggling for the most part, save for the sweeping tails to y's and g's and loops to l's, which encroached on the lines above and below, so that the whole had somewhat the appearance of a Chinese puzzle. I was allowed to take the most precious page in my hand and hold it close to my eyes; and as I gazed at it earnestly I saw 'twas the dedication which was so beautifully expressed that I had ever when reading it had a mind to envy the sister who was so addressed for posterity at the beginning of an immortal romance.

*"To My Deare Lady and Sister, THE COVNTESSE
OF PEMBROKE.*

"Here now haue you (most deare and most worthie to be most deare ladie) this idle work of mine, which I feare (like the spider's web) will bee thought fitter to bee swept away than worne to any other purpose. For my part, in very trueth (as the cruell fathers among

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the Greekes were wont to doe to the babes they would not foster), I could well find in my heart to cast out in some desert of forgetfulnes this child, which I am loth to father. But you desired me to doe it, and your desire to my heart is an absolute commandement. It is done onely for you, onely to you. If you keepe it to your selfe, or to such friends who will weigh errors in the balance of goodwill, I hope, for the father's sake, it will bee pardoned, perchance made much of, though in it self it haue deformities. For indeed for seuerer eyes it is not, being but a trifle, and that triflingly handled. Your deare selfe can best witnes the maner, being done in loose sheetes of paper, most of it in your presence, the rest by sheetes sent vnto you as fast as they were done. . . . Reade it then at your idle times, and the follies your good iudgment will finde in it blame not, but laugh at. And so, looking for no better stuffe than as in a Haberdasher's shop, glasses or feathers, you will continue to loue the writer, who doth exceedingly loue you, and most most heartilie praies you may long liue to be a principall ornament to the family of the Sidneis.

“Your louing brother.

“PHILIP SIDNEY.”

Reading these most affectionate words in the hand of him who had writ them, and in the presence of her

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to whom they were writ, affected me deeply. And so full were my eyes that as I looked from the casement on the far-stretching sylvan paradise, bathed in the lengthening sunlight of that radiant afternoon, it swam before me.

The Countess methought was not displeased at my emotion, but indeed did seem more than ever graciously disposed to take me to her heart in the bonds of a warm and suddenly conceived friendship, as if she regarded me as some link with the past and the departed spirit of her glorious and gallant brother. Maybe it will sound to some daring and presuming to the verge of absurdity to speak of friendship existing so soon 'twixt two of ages and positions so vastly divergent ; 'twixt the great lady long famed far and wide for her beauty, talents and learning, and surpassing generosity, and the unknown Huguenot maiden, shy and retiring, the orphan of a poor scholar and the ward of a simple country clergyman.

Yet for all that, it was so, and happened so naturally that I was neither filled with awe nor surprise at my lady treating me as an intellectual equal.

I could not but note the difference in her everyday discourse with Ambrosia, who outwardly was so much more developed and of the stature of a woman than I was. She spoke to her lightly, as one speaks to children, and to my great relief Ambrosia showed

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no signs of resenting my having been so quickly taken into the Countess's favour and intimacy. It was only Nat's attentions to me that she grudged, and on which she kept a jealous watch ; but even in this she had already shown signs of relenting, and the time was not far off when she was to look to me for the companionship and solace she could no longer get from her brother.

Lady Pembroke presented me very sweetly as her new little friend to those ladies of her household whom I had not seen with her at the Grange, and I took my place amongst the group of broidcrers seated in the oriel at the end of the long gallery, where hung many fair paintings, one by the hand of the great Leonardo da Vinci, others by Raphael, Carlo Dolci, and other Italian masters. But I saw none there by the Flemings, Van Eyck and Memling, whose quaint Madonnas had become so familiar and dear to me in the churches of Bruges and Antwerp, albeit used for idolatrous purposes.

I was given a wyvern's claw for a sampler border, to display my prowess as a needlewoman upon, but I do not think that I greatly distinguished myself, though I may not have jerked and broken my thread and pricked my fingers, and cast roving glances out of window on the sunlit landscape so often as did Ambrosia. She and I came later to Wilton House

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to be improved in other arts besides that of needlework. These were singing to the lute, playing on the virginals, and dancing. Ambrosia shone most at the dance, yet methought some of the freedom and wild grace of her outdoor movements was lacking so soon as she was under a roof. Her natural step as she crossed the sward was more goodly than a dance, and I would liefer see her run a race with Nat, climb a tree, or fly over a fence than follow her through the intricacies of a courante or sarabande.

Perchance Mr. William Herbert shared somewhat my opinion, for we encountered him more than once as we came down to Wilton House from the high slopes pacing Sir Philip's avenue. It was there that he appeared to regard Ambrosia with such admiring looks, there that he put into the simplest word of greeting a sweetness and meaning which even I, young as I was and unacquainted with the world and its ways, guessed might be dangerous. But within doors this gentleman, when he met Ambrosia, was less interested in his manner towards her, and sometimes scarce noticed her amongst the bevy of fair women of his mother's household, who made bright retorts to his witticisms, and laid themselves out to please his fastidious taste in their converse. They were for the most part of noble birth and considerable fortune, destined to pass from the Countess's service

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into the hands of good husbands. Master Meredith told me that many negotiations had been begun and abandoned by the Earl of Pembroke for the marriage of his son and heir. The last had been with Lord Burleigh for the hand of his granddaughter, the Lady Bridget Vere, who was one of thirteen sisters, but this had come to nothing, and 'twas said Master Herbert had showed no disposition to wed with any one.

"But sooner or later he must bring a bride to Wilton," Master Meredith had said. "'Tis his duty to his illustrious birth and parentage, and none will welcome the new mistress when she cometh more warmly than Wilton's present dear lady."

Master Meredith was blind then to that danger to his child's heart of which I have spoken. To him it was but the young, careless, merry heart of a child, not yet to be taken serious thought of, and Mrs. Dorcas was of a like mind.

So it happed that only I foresaw what might result from Mr. Herbert's prolonged headache which kept him away from London and the Court here in the country through summer and autumn till mid-winter was past. And my fears were so vague and undefined that I held them to myself.

VIII

AT STONEHENGE

THE hedges were garlanded with trails of ripening blackberries and traveller's joy, and the beeches and limes were doffing their green and putting on wondrous shades of red and yellow and tawny-brown, whilst wraiths of mist hung about the bracken and undergrowth in the park.

Autumn was advancing and the day dreaded by Nat, but keenly looked forward to by his comrade, Philip Massinger, was drawing near.

At Michaelmas, the two lads were to set out for Oxford, and Master Meredith was to take them thither, to place them under the tutor of Oriel, which had been his own and my father's college.

Ambrosia at times was in great heaviness of spirit at the thought of losing her brother, and one day, as if to cheer her, he proposed an expedition to that wonderful place high up on the solitary downs, called Stonehenge, of which I had heard them talk, but

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had not yet seen with my own eyes save in the far distance.

Nat, when Ambrosia had not been by, had promised once that he would take me to see the sun rise above the biggest of the giant stones, which had got there thousands of years ago; none knew how. Some said the magician Merlin had brought them from the savage realm of an Irish King, others that they were fragments of a mighty temple in which the Druids had worshipped the sun. And another place Nat had promised to show me was the green, deserted ramparts of Old Sarum, within which birds now built their nests and hares and rabbits played, but where once, long ago, a fair cathedral church had risen against the sky, surrounded by busy streets, in which the ring of spurs and the clash of steel had oft mingled with the voices of choristers and chime of cathedral bells.

I had a great desire to visit that dead, grass-grown city on the hill, and to reflect on the lives that had begun and ended, of the betrothals and marriages, heart-breakings and burials which had gone on there as now they went on in the newer but still ancient city below in the valley. But Nat's promises, Mrs. Dorcas warned me, were like piecrust—made to be broken; so it surprised me scarce so much his having done nought to keep them, as it did, when

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that September morn he bid Ambrosia go and coax out of the cook-maid manchets and venison pasties enough for four.

“Who are the four?” Ambrosia asked.

“You and me, Philip and Dove,” he answered.

“What need have we of Philip’s company? and as for Dove, she couldn’t walk so far to save her life.”

“If she cannot walk, she shall be carried,” Nat said decisively, and paid no heed to Ambrosia’s gibe, that she supposed he meant to order my Lord Pembroke’s coach and horses to take me to Stonehenge.

In sooth I was not a great walker, and I was footsore and nigh spent by the time we had climbed the steep Amesbury road from Wilton, and looked down on the lovely Vale of Avon, with its streams winding through woods and orchards, white villages and flowery meadows. Then Nat and Philip joined their strong hands together in what they called a “queen’s cushion,” and Ambrosia lifted me on to it with scoffs at my dainty feet, but smiling at them good-naturedly withal. While Nat and Philip carried me it fell to her share to carry the provisions, at which she feigned to grumble. So soon as we reached the wide road of short grass ’twixt those curious mounds called barrows, which Philip said were full of the bones

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of British chieftains, they put me down, for in the crisp air and on the springy turf I felt no longer weary—as if I could walk even to the horizon. Ambrosia, when she had got rid of her burden, tore off her shoes and stockings, and circled and danced about like a wild thing uncaged.

Higher and higher we climbed, and methought we must soon be in the sky like the larks. Then of a sudden there came in sight the monster pillars looming above us in their solitary grandeur and mystery, with the vast plains like a boundless ocean of land sweeping away on all sides.

I think that as I gazed on that great heathen riddle in stone, which has perplexed the learned minds of all ages, I was every whit as much impressed as when I had looked up at the soaring spire of Salisbury, while I waited for Master Meredith outside the Deanery gate. Nought could be a greater contrast than the Christian fane in the vale, with its lace-like carvings and thousand wondrously-wrought religious devices, and this rugged remnant of a temple on the heights—plain, ungarnished, yet so mysteriously majestic withal in its bare simplicity. We sought shade from the blazing noontide sun within the deep purple shadows the stones cast upon the grass. Around us the harebells tossed their transparent little heads, and one lark after the other rose singing

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ever more joyously the higher he whirled into the cloudless blue.

Up here one only felt the touch of autumn in the air, and saw nothing of its glowing pageant ; for not a tree nor even a bush was to be seen, only the great sheepfolds and far-stretching tracts of uncultivated chalky country, melting in the distance into silvery lilac and greyish pink, like the faded hues of the tapestry at the Grange.

The only sounds that broke the stillness of these wondrous silent plains were the tinkle of sheep-bells and the song of the lark. An old shepherd, wrapped in his wide, dark-blue cloak, sat with his crook amongst the sheep as motionless as the stones, and he was the only human being in sight. We being young and of healthy appetites, the first thing we did within the precincts of the ancient sun-temple was to fall to devouring our manchets and pasties which certainly seemed to have a more delightful flavour out on these breezy heights than they would have had if eaten at the board within the Rectory walls. After every crumb had vanished Philip told the story of how the biggest of the stones standing apart from the others came to have a dent in it, and was called the Friar's Heel.

Then Ambrosia, because she never could sit still or rest for long, flitted off, and Philip, because Ambrosia

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to him seemingly was as the candle which attracts the moth, followed her.

Nat and I were left together. I sat leaning against one of the mighty lichen-covered trilithons, and Nat was stretched on the ground at my feet. Somewhat to my astonishment Nat now drew a book from his pouch and asked me to read from it aloud. The only book that I had ever heard Nat own to loving was that wherein the adventures of the lean and sorrowful Knight of la Mancha had been related with so rich an humour by the Spaniard Cervantes whilst in prison. But this was not *Don Quixote* out of which Nat would have me read to him. It was a book of true adventures, though stranger than any imaginary ones, which had befallen the great Sea Captain, Sir Walter Raleigh and his Lieutenant Captain Kemys on their first voyages in search of Guiana and the fabulous golden city of El Dorado. It had been writ by Sir Walter to refute the calumnies of his enemies, who had said that he had never sailed for Guiana at all, but had paid the mariners to go while he kicked his heels in Plymouth. And who that read the story could misbelieve that the writer had been an eye-witness of what he narrated and a participator in the adventures he described? Not I, for as I did Nat's bidding and read from the book of travels, I forgot where I was, and instead of sitting in the shadow of

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Stonehenge on Salisbury Plain, I was with the adventurers on the shores of the great Orinoco, as they made tracks through pathless virgin forests, launched canoes of their own making to drift up the unknown river, bartered with Red Indians, fed on turtles' eggs, caught monkeys and killed alligators. One day would they be in high hopes of reaching the promised land which, "whatsoever Prince shall possess it, he shall be lord of more gold and a more beautiful empire, and of more cities and people than either the King of Spain or the Grand Turk"; the next cast down in despair, attacked by pestilence, scorched and withered by the hot suns. Failure was the end of the story, failure which had made those who staid at home mock at the "Discoverie of Guiana," and ask why no more wonderful treasure had been found than mere quartz and a few crystals.

Yet many have since believed that the empire of untold wealth existed, might still be won, and have set sail to encounter storm and shipwreck, famine and death, in the search for it. And the great soul of the fallen statesman who had first dreamed of adding that empire to the Queen's dominions was destined to fret and hunger in long years of captivity for a chance to try once more. When at last it came and the grim portals of the Tower swung back to let him go forth, how tragically he was to fail again, coming home to

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no glory and honours, but in dire sorrow and disgrace to lay his head on the block.

It was the doings of such heroes as Raleigh and before him of the Sea Captains Willoughby, Hawkins, and Drake, that Nat cared to read and hear about, not of Achilles, Ulysses, and Hector, who were too much connected in his mind with hours of confinement in his father's small study and punishments for frowardness and lack of diligence.

He brought his head nearer to me so that his black curls touched my lap, and gazed enthralled as I read on of what befell the crew of the *Lion's Whelp* when they took to the river in their perilous small crafts, of the tales they heard of a race of men with faces in their breasts, of fierce Amazon women, of golden palaces and statues, and mountains of diamonds, and of how, if they did not actually see these, they saw wonders enough.

"Why I declare, little Dove," he said, when I came to the end, "your soft eyes wax nigh fierce as you read, and your coo hath the sound of a trumpet in it. That is not how you read 'Consider the lilies,' that first day and moved us to wrath, for all your gentleness, because we knew we should be chid the more for our stumbling when it was our turn. Aye, you have roused the longing in me afresh to be scudding over the ocean's waves in a bravely-manned cutter

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with all her sails bellying in the fair breeze. Away, past the Canaries and the Azores to the Indies, to the ends of the earth, or to the North Pole. I should care not whither, so long as it were to act, to explore, to fight, to be doing, which is life to me, even if I died in the doing of it. No, I would not die, but my ship would come home laden with silken stuffs and treasure, and with a captive Indian prince on board. And I would hang your neck with coral, Dove, and your ears with pearls the size of acorns."

I edged away from him and said—

"Methinks the coral would become Ambrosia best."

He seemed not to hear what I said, and with a cloud descending on his handsome upturned face he went on in a changed tone—

"Ah, I am forgetting! Why do I talk thus? I, who am to be forced into being a clerk and maybe a parson against my inclination because it pleaseth my father to mould me after his own pattern. The only unknown country he hath wandered in is Plato's mazy world, and so perforce I must do likewise. I must wear a black doublet and mew in some close chamber at Oxford, conning musty grammars and dictionaries, till I grow wan and pale and my brain gets addled and dull from being stuffed with Latin

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and dry philosophy. Ugh!" He groaned and sighed and buried his face in the grass.

I asked whether he had ever spoken with such vehement distaste of the path chosen for him to Master Meredith, for I could not think that one so gentle and kind as the good Rector would force his only son into aught that was so contrary to his nature as a student's life.

"I know my father," he made answer; "he is good as an angel belike, but when he hath made up his mind, 'twould be as useless to try and make him alter it as to try and move Stonchenge itself."

"Yet it were surely better to speak ere you go to Oxford, and to reason with him to let you follow your heart's desire. There is no shame or sin in wanting to be a sailor, and perchance, if you say nothing, he will think that you are going to a college not unwillingly, like Philip Massinger."

He lifted his face again, and I marked the signs of weakness about the mouth and chin, which made it less attractive to my eyes than Ambrosia's, greatly as it resembled her in beauty of complexion and perfect chiseling of feature.

"No, 'tis useless, I tell thee, to try and reason on this matter with my father," he answered; "I must go. Dorcas hath made all my shirts and bands and nightcaps. My name standeth mayhap already on the

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roll of Oriel. I could not speak now if I would. Yes, I must go to Oxford, but whether I stay there is another matter. 'Tis always possible to run away to sea."

"Then you would cause your father ten times more pain and grief than if you spoke out plainer now," said I.

"But I should be overseas, and so not by to see his pain and grief or anger."

I understood him. He who talked of bold adventures, of encountering with joy wild beasts, divers dangers, even death by land and water, had not the courage to oppose his father's wishes in a manly, straightforward fashion, and crave to be allowed to take his own way ; but would fain be out of sight of the suffering of which he would be the cause. So I told Nat that he spoke like a coward, and I hoped it was only talk and he would never act a coward's part. He showed no anger at my plain speech, nor seemed to note the scornful accent I had laid, ere I knew it, on the word coward. There was silence betwixt us, and he lay gazing up into the blue vault above us with a laugh on his lips, for Nat was one whose moods of depression passed quickly away.

I was thinking how unwonted it was for Ambrosia to leave me so long with Nat, when I heard her voice near me, and looked round. She was standing on

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one of the fallen pillars of stone, and behind her were two standing erect, with a third laid on the top of them, forming a dark and massive arch above her. The breeze sported with her raven hair, and swept her cherry-coloured kirtle backwards from her slender brown ankles. She was a figure full of glowing life and colour, as she stood perched there amongst the old grey stones. Each time I looked on it, Ambrosia's wild beauty struck me anew, for 'twas one of those things which we do not grow so accustomed to with daily intercourse that in time we are unaware of it. "I have run away from Philip," said she. "Stupid boy, I wanted him to play at gipsies, but he listed only to play at love."

Play at gipsies! Did she not know that she had enough Egyptian blood in her veins to be one, without making believe to play at it? Then I wondered if Ambrosia and Nat had ever heard the tale Mrs. Dorcas had related to me that evening the Queen was at Wilton House. Perchance I knew more than they did of their mother, beautiful Zdenka's history. I had never heard either of them speak of her or her hapless fate, and 'twas not for me to mention the subject to them.

Now it was brought to my mind, I could see the spreading plain dotted over with the tents and caravans and cauldrons of Zdenka's tribe. Instead



UNDER THE SHADOW OF STONEHENGE.

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of two pair of luminous black eyes, a score or more flashed their fire around me; yellow, purple, and scarlet kerchiefs fluttered on the breeze, and the strange Slav speech sounded in my ears.

But the picture vanished when I heard Nat say, as Ambrosia came and seated herself beside him—

“So Philip playeth not the game to thy taste. Maybe 'tis because he is earnest and not only gallanting.”

“That game is always stupid. I am too young. I would fain know nothing about it yet——”

“Sis, for shame! You are not speaking truth now. Methinks you wanted to know something about it t'other day, when you left me in the lurch at the top of a tree, and ran to meet Master Herbert in the avenue, and when what he whispered in your ear methinks——”

“Hush, hush. How dare you,” Ambrosia broke in. “Run to meet him, forsooth! I didn't know he was there. Nay, I will not suffer such things to be said, even from you.”

Tears of anger started to her eyes, and clenching her brown fist she struck the lips that had offended her. But Nat only laughed as he had laughed when I called him a coward. The next moment Ambrosia was in an agony of repentance. She cast her arms round his neck and cried passionately—

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"Sweet Nat, I am sorry, sorry; forgive me or I shall die," and as she held him in that strong embrace, Philip came up and watched them with a look on his pale face which was stern and thoughtful beyond his years.

"Be not so cast down, Phil," Nat said. "Wait till you have writ those fine plays that are to be as great as Master Shakespeare's, and Ambrosia will love you better."

Philip made answer, looking dreamily out to the horizon, where soft faint colours, rose-pink, lavender, and sea-green melted into one another like an opal—

"I shall write plays, but they will not be as great as Master Shakespeare's. Ambrosia will never love me better, and I shall not try again to make her think less ill of me."

"Think ill of you!" exclaimed Ambrosia; "as if that were possible. You know, Philip, I like you well enow when you don't sigh and frown, and look melancholy, and say you see me in your dreams. I would not willingly be the disturber of any one's rest. Come, let us have a race to yonder sheep-fold."

Ambrosia won the race, and then we took the homeward way, soon coming again to wooded paths through the happy valleys and fair villages of the Vale of Avon, which seemed another world from the

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wide, bleak country over which those enigmatic Druidical ruins reigned.

'Twas chill and dusk when we came down to the cross-roads, and Philip Massinger left us to go through the gates of Wilton House. We skirted the park, passing the leaden-roofed tiny chapel of Fugglestone (or Fulestone, to give it a prettier-sounding name, meaning Village of Birds), which abutted on the park walls. It was Queen Adelia, second wife of the first King Henry, who had founded the leper hospital of Fulestone, and, being a leper herself, a door and window were made from her lodging into the chancel of the chapel, that so she might hear prayers. Country folks still spoke with shuddering awe of the "Leprosy Queen," and feared to see her spirit walking the lanes when twilight fell. Fearless as Ambrosia was of daylight dangers, she cherished superstitious terrors of wraiths and ghosts, and I saw that she crouched closer to Nat as we neared the chapel wicket.

"See, see! Methinks this is she—the Leprosy Queen," she murmured, in a fearful whisper.

"Tut!" said Nat. "Ghostly Queens do not stand by the roadside with horses and servants."

The young lady we thus chanced to encounter was in truth no ghost of a Leprosy Queen, though some were of opinion that she would be Queen of England

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one day, when her great kinswoman Elizabeth laid down the sceptre in death. Indeed, the old Queen herself had recognized the importance of little Arabella Stuart's claim to be next heir to her throne, when she had entertained her at the tender age of eight at a gorgeous banquet at Whitehall, and presented the little maid to her courtiers as a personage of importance. But by the time the Lady Arabella grew up, the Queen's whim with regard to her had changed into suspicion and dislike, and 'twas left to others to scheme and lay dark plans of placing the crown on her fair brow, against her wish, instead of on the King of Scots.

Of all this, and of who the lady by the roadside might be, we knew nothing, and could know nothing, the evening we came home from Stonehenge through the misty September twilight. How could we guess, as we beheld her standing there, with her long bright hair floating over her gold-laced riding dress, her dancing merry blue eyes and dimpling, laughing lips, that she was to be the innocent cause of bringing men to ruin and the scaffold, and that over her own head hovered a fate as mournful and pitifully tragical as any that befel the heroines of the Greek drama?

She stepped a few paces into the road, and addressed Nat.

"Canst tell me, pretty boy, how far 'tis now to

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my Lord Pembroke's house? I have rid to-day from my aunt's, the Countess of Lennox, twenty miles on the other side of Salisbury, and towards the end of the journey my horse hath cast a shoe. I have sent my servant on to find a blacksmith, but methinks 'tis unnecessary to wait for his return if I am near enough to my destination to walk to it."

"You are quite near, Madam," Nat informed her. "The gates of Wilton are within a stone's-throw of Fulestone Chapel. I will show you the way thither if you will allow me."

"If it is so close," she said, with her flashing smile, "I need not deprive these maidens of their escort." She scanned us from head to foot, her eyes resting a moment longer, methought, with special pleasure on Ambrosia. She turned to her two women—

"Come, we had liefer walk on than wait for Peter in the rising mist."

Then nodding to us, with another smile she said, "If my tarrying at Wilton were not to be so short, I might hope to meet you again."

Meet her again we did, though it was not on the morrow, or the day after, but in a new century and a new reign, when King James came to keep his court at Wilton House, with Queen Anne the Dane, and sent for the Lady Arabella to be its brightest star.

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“What a fair lady,” Ambrosia said, as we took the footpath over the fields. “If I were a man, I would follow her like a dog to the world’s end for the sake of her smile.”

“If you were a man! Methought if you were a man you would be Master Herbert’s page, and follow him to London,” Nat said.

If his admiration for the lady by the roadside were equal to Ambrosia’s, Nat kept it to himself.

IX

BRAVE MISTRESS JEANNE

MASTER MEREDITH came back from Oxford without Nat, having left him there, and Ambrosia would not be comforted, at any rate not by me. She shunned my company more than before, and when our tasks were done would wander forth alone, leading her tame vixen by a chain. All day she sorely missed her brother, and at night sometimes I heard her crying as she lay abed, and though I fain would have crept to her chamber and laid my head beside hers on the pillow and whispered words of solace in her ear, I daren't do it, knowing that my consolation would be no more welcome to her than Job's comforters were to him.

Master Meredith being no longer burdened with the teaching of his son, and correction of Nat's blotted composition and hexameters, methought the time had come for me to be mindful of my promise to the Countess in respect to Master Meredith's opus. I passed long hours in his study, not for ever anxiously watching the dial to know the minute of escape, as

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Ambrosia did when she was there, but forgetful of time and nigh all else outside the world of books. The Rector would often leave me when he donned his cassock and put a corner-cap over his skull-cap, to go forth a-visiting his parishioners, and return to find me still in the same position wedded to my book. He would say, "Little mouse, what is it absorbs thee?" or "Hast any verse to show me?"

But for verse-making, I did prefer to the study the walks of the Grange opposite, 'twixt the yew hedges, or the arbour in the maze where I was kindly permitted to betake myself when I listed. For me the interior of the little garden house was as it were pervaded by the spiritual presence of Sir Philip, since I had stood there with the Countess and recited her elegy, emboldened thereto by her sweet graciousness.

I liked well, too, to hearken to old Mrs. Alice Langton's discourse as she told of that far-away life within the nunnery walls, which indeed seemed a life belonging to another age. Methought ofttimes the faded pagan figures of the tapestry on the walls behind her gave place in her dim vision to the sad, solemn faces of those who stood about the Cross in the picture of the Crucifixion in the dining-hall of the Abbey, where the soft subdued voice of a sister had spoken the grace after refection. Mistress Alice had writ down a record of her thoughts and feelings in

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those days so long ago, when the great religious upheaval had cast her and thousands of others out on the world with a bare pension from the King of six pounds a year. The manuscript lay together with her psalter, hour-book and rosary on a praying-table in a niche near the fire-place, and she promised that she would bequeath it to me to peruse, when she passed beyond the bourne, which passing methought surely must be near, considering her very great age.

Sometimes I went with Master Meredith to visit others of the aged and sick, and it was one mild November afternoon when the sky was silvery-grey and the trees dark and bare except for a few ragged yellow leaves clinging here and there to the boughs, that I came with him over the fields from visiting the poor pensioners at the spital in Wilton, and dared to broach this subject of the opus. I said that I hoped ere the trees put forth their spring shoots again a goodly beginning would have been made.

"How far do you reckon I shall have gotten by then?" he asked.

"From Homer to Sappho, maybe to Archimedes and Theocritus," I replied.

"Homer! A volume might be writ on Homer's work," he said; "but on Homer himself 'twere hard to pen more than a line. Who knoweth whether Homer was one or many? Nay, some are not certain that

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he was man or woman. Do not the stray priceless burning gems of Sappho's song that have come down to us give an idea of what the splendour of the whole must have been and of what woman is capable in poetry? Aye, child, 'tis not material for my work that is lacking. 'Tis inspiration. I have winnowed and garnered till the mill is full of grist, but I would fain not grind it out in tortured conceits. I would have it roll forth in dignified, noble periods, as doth Master Hooker's prose. That is my ideal, hearken."

He leaned against the stile ere we crossed it into the road and quoted the passage with which the First Book of the Ecclesiastical Polity endeth.

"'Of Law there can be no less acknowledged than that her seat is the bosom of God, her voice the harmony of the World; all things in Heaven and Earth do her homage; the very least as feeling her care, and the greatest as not exempted from her power; both angels and men and creatures of what condition so ever, though each in different sort and manner, yet all with uniform consent, admiring her as the mother of their peace and joy.'

"How majestic a peroration, yet achieved with easy and simple language withal. No straining for effect is apparent, but each word is the rightly chosen word and rolls forth in its right place. When I hear mine

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own words sounding in my ears in such persuasive rhythm as that, then I shall make rapid progress with my opus."

I could have said how in the short simple sermons I had heard him preach on peaceful Sabbath morns in the little church to the handful of country folks, he seemed to me to approach his ideal, and to choose his language with the niceness of a scholar, for all its plainness.

But he talked on, quoting other sentences from Latin writings and from the Hebrew prophets, asking what purer poetry, in prose, could there be than certain chapters in Isaiah and the Book of Ruth. And I believe that he would have stood there for hours forgetful that we were ankle deep in damp grass, and that the soft winds were blowing up rain, had not the huntsman's horn of a sudden rent the air on the hill-side above the Rectory, and looking round we saw the hounds, and red-coats, and sleek steaming horses flash towards the orchard, followed up by the village swains on foot.

"Both Master William Herbert and his brother Philip are there," said Master Meredith, glancing up at the horsemen outlined for a moment within our view against the cloudy sky.

"Master Philip leadeth. He is a rare Nimrod. I trust the fox hath not left his trail on my flowering

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shrubs and sweet marjoram and germander, else all my garden will be trampled on and destroyed."

His anxiety was all for his much-loved garden, but I had another fear.

Had not Ambrosia said that morning the vixen had gotten loose, and she must go and search for it round about Farmer Penfold's so soon as she was free from her tasks. I was not generally so quick to divine things, yet it came to me all at once that the sharp divergence of hounds and huntsmen from the crest of the hill towards the village and the Rectory might be caused by poor Ruby's scent, or at least she would be in danger thereby.

Without a word to Master Meredith I took to my heels, scrambled through the opposite hedge and ran by a short cut to the pleasance, in time to warn Ambrosia of what might happen.

She came with skirts and hair flying in the wind from I know not where, crying in excitement, "The hounds, the hounds, tally-ho! If only Nat were here we should speed after them together for miles and miles over the Downs. Oh, if Nat were here!"

"Is Ruby fast?" I panted.

Ambrosia wrung her hands.

"No, alack! the darling is loose. Methought I saw her with a fat duck in her mouth slinking over the furrows from the farm, not long since. I have

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been waiting at the fence to watch where she burrowed to hide herself. She must be in the orchard—the orchard, and see they are coming.”

There was a crackling and trampling down of hurdles under horses' hoofs as she spoke, and in a moment a *mêlée* of hounds and horses overflowed the orchard into the pleasance. Wherever Ruby's hiding-place may have been she felt no safety there at the approach of her natural enemies, for with a cry like a frightened baby's she leapt, in her confusion, over the sunk fence, not into her mistress's arms but into mine. It was a surprise and shock for me, but I held her, the brown furry thing, tight against my shoulder, and would have run to the house with her only the hounds were encompassing me on all sides.

“Drop the brute, foolish wench, or you'll be bit by the dogs,” cried one of the sportsmen, a youth on a glossy black mare, as he dealt about him blows with his hunting-crop. It was he whom Master Meredith had pointed out in the distance as Master Philip Herbert, the Earl's second son, who had been bred up for the most part on my Lord's Welsh estates at Ludlow, and was seldom seen at Wilton. He was handsome and black-browed like Master William, but inferior in powers of mind and charm of person. It was said he had a choleric temper and an uncivil

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tongue when he listed, and his boast was that he understood horses and dogs better than books. Yet he had been at New College, Oxford, when but nine years old, and was thought extraordinarily clever for his years.

"Cruel wretch," Ambrosia exclaimed, forgetting or not caring in her wrath and anxiety for Ruby what she spoke and to whom. "Drop her, forsooth ; would you have her torn limb from limb?"

Young Master Philip stared with insolent coolness not unmingled with admiration at Ambrosia as she wept fierce tears from her flashing eyes.

"Your looks are prettier than your speech," said he, with an unpleasant laugh. "Methinks we have alighted on two vixens and not one only." That instant Master William Herbert came up and flung himself out of the saddle. A word of command rang from his lips to the huntsmen, and soon he was standing there alone by his horse, the hounds having been turned back on their old scent away over the open country. Master Philip galloped over the pleasance to get to the fields on the other side, making no parting salutation or excuse for the havoc his horse's feet wrought on the sod. From that hour Ambrosia ever hated him, though in after-times he would fain have made amends for his arrogance and discourtesy with smiles and gallantries.



FOXHOUNDS IN THE RECTORY GARDEN.

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Ambrosia took her pet from my arms and examined and crooned over its torn hind-paw, which one of the leaping, excited, pink-tongued dogs had caught in its jaws even as I held it. Blood poured from my hand on to my kirtle, but 'twas not only Ruby's, my own blood ran with it ; for, as Master Philip had prophesied, I had been bit too.

I bound up my wrist with my handkerchief, unnoticed by Ambrosia and Master Herbert. He was bending over her and the vixen, speaking words of sweet pity and condolence, as if his heart bled for the little animal's pain in its bleeding foot, and for the grief it caused Ambrosia. He stroked with softest touch the sleek, sharp ears and nose, but all the while he looked into Ambrosia's eyes, the long lashes of which were bedewed with crystal tears. Methought in this nearness he found the beauty of her young, dark face set in its frame of wind-tossed hair irresistible ; and as he drew nearer and nearer it to murmur caressing endearments over the wounded animal, he could not help himself, and must needs rest his lips on the firm, red mouth, just where its upper lip caught the lower one to it as in a vice.

Ambrosia threw back her head and pushed him away, and the gesture was not one of anger, but rather of proud pleasure. She glowed from neck to

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brow, and the usually tight-locked lips parted and smiled in a tender curve. Master Meredith coming round from his flower-garden ruefully to inspect the damage done to the grass plot might have seen, as I did, what passed 'twixt Ambrosia and Master William Herbert, had he not been gazing dreamily through the opened casement into Zdenka's chamber, swept and garnished with its posy of late autumn blossoms standing out in the blue Nankin jar against the shadows.

Ah, dear Master Meredith, how alert soever his eye might be to see a new plant spring up, or to discover new beauties in his loved authors, how blind was he, too, and abstracted from things that went on quite near in the world around him.

He spoke afterwards, when Master William Herbert had taken his leave and rid away, of the kindness and courtesy he had shown, and of the contrast in manners 'twixt him and his younger brother, yet I knew instinctively even then that Master William had not been kind, that what he had done was wrong, and that Master Philip for all his churlishness had acted less ill towards Ambrosia. Before another summer came, he would be back in London gallivanting with the fair ladies of the Court, belike with dark Mrs. Mary Fitton, and the dark maiden of the country-side would be forgot. But maids do

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not forget so easily, and she would be ever cherishing the memory of that stolen caress and thinking that he who had been the thief thereof must indeed love her and prefer her before all others.

That day saw the drawing together of me and Ambrosia, and henceforth she was to be to me as a most loving sister. I was somewhat faint and dizzy as I went into the house, thinking that I had best show my hurt to Mrs. Dorcas and not scare Master Meredith about it.

Mrs. Dorcas looked gravely on the teeth-marks on my wrist, and asked if I was sure it was one of the dogs and not the vixen, in her fright, that had bit me.

"A fox-bite is worse than a dog's," quoth she. "The fangs are poisonous."

She was making a plaster of deadly nightshade as an anti-poison, when Ambrosia came running in and caught my wounded hand gently but firmly in hers.

"Dear, brave Dove," she exclaimed, "how you stood your ground and saved Ruby from the hounds! And I never thanked you or heeded if you were hurt. Oh forgive me, and let me see."

She examined my wrist without flinching, then stooped quickly and laid the warm lips Master William Herbert had so lately kissed to the spot and sucked it. I felt her drawing forth all that was

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in the wound, and was assured that I need be no longer afraid.

"'Tis clear of poison now," said she, "and it doth not matter whether thou wast bit by a dog or a fox."

When I was a-bed, mightily afeared that I should dream of naught but those leaping, barking hounds with their tongues lolling out, Ambrosia crept from her chamber into mine and laid herself down beside me.

"I did not think 'twas in thee to be so brave," said she. "I have thought you a quiet, timid, bookish Dove, and nothing more. I have misunderstood you. I know now, Jeanne, that you have the wisdom of the serpent as well as the gentleness of the dove. To think that you did not cry out, and how calmly you stood there afterwards, as if nothing were the matter ; so, methinks he, Master Herbert, knoweth not that you were hurt. And I paid no heed to you, because . . ." She broke off, and methought that if it had not been dark I should have seen her blushes. "Oh," she went on in a soft, broken whisper, "is he not grand and great, so gallant and handsome? and you were there. You saw what he did. He kissed me. That meaneth he must love me, and one day I shall be his betrothed. How wonderful, how very wonderful!"

"Wonderful indeed," I echoed in my heart bitterly,

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for of a sudden I seemed to have grown older and more worldly wise than she who lay there with her ebon locks floating over my pillow.

Yet I could not speak my thoughts and dash her hopes, and so let her hug the sweet, delusive dream to her soul, while I was conscious vaguely that 'twould prove empty of fulfilment, and cause her sorrow and much soreness of spirit.

X

SALISBURY CATHEDRAL

AFTER I had lived for two years in Master Meredith's house, it had become so dear a home to me that I felt almost as if I had never known another.

I thrived well in the sweet air of Burcombe, and had grown to be stronger, and even taller, and I was able to join Ambrosia in some of her long rambles without paying for it afterwards both by exceeding weariness and footsoreness. Those two years of quiet country life had been varied by frequent intercourse with the Countess of Pembroke, and sharing in some of the splendours of Wilton House. In winter I had witnessed plays acted in the spacious hall by my Lord's company of players, and in summer the undulating park with its glorious trees and fleeting lights and shadows formed the background for masques and pastorals, the beauty whereof was like a dream, which the gentry of the county around flocked to see.

Once only I had lain a night from Burcombe, and

Salisbury Cathedral

that was when Master Meredith had taken me to see his kinsfolk in the historic town of Sherborne. They dwelt near the castle which had been my Lord Bishop of Sarum's property till Sir Walter Raleigh got it from him to make it the magnificent country home of his fair lady and boys.

To Salisbury I oft bore Master Meredith company when he went there on business at the booksellers' or to attend a Synod in the Chapter House. Sometimes we took our cheer in the old oak-panelled parlour of the old George Inn, whither I had come a little stranger out of Antwerp with Reuben Windt, and I always thought of his poor clumsy figure tumbling over the tight-rope as we crossed the paved courtyard. Oftener we were guests of Master Meredith's good friend the Dean, who rallied me in a kindly fashion about my arrival at Salisbury with Tully's manuscript in my arms, and always made belief to treat me as an expert in the discerning of rarities.

When the Dean and Master Meredith were engaged in conference, I loved much to take a book from the Dean's shelves, and passing the terrace of cut yews, go down to the river's bank whither stretched the smooth grass plots of all the gardens on the western side of that most fair Close of Sarum; a galaxy of gardens, each seeming as if it would out-

Salisbury Cathedral

rival its neighbour in some point of beauty. One having the finest yews and ilexes, another the crown imperial, and again another boasteth that its view of the Cathedral is unsurpassed.

Methinks I neglected my book to look down from my perch on a weeping willow into the clear brown waters of the Avon rushing by to meet its brothers, the Nadder and Wylie. 'Tis this trio of rivers with their many off-shooting crystal rills and streamlets which give the lush meads encompassing Salisbury city their rich emerald hues and abundance of cresses, rampions, sedges, irises, and all manner of water plants.

But even the rushing river at my feet and the verdant sunlit meadows beyond, where the red and dappled cows splashed in and out of the streams, could not hold my eyes for long from gazing upwards at the wondrous sculptured west front and soaring spire of the Cathedral. I had learned to know how it looked in all seasons and weathers.

I had seen it on a windy March day with purple shadows and silvery high lights playing upon the grey carven figures. I had seen it growing rosy red in the sunsets of May, and standing out radiant, pure cut, and near white against cloudless summer and clear frosty winter skies. I had beheld it half hid in the soft veil of autumn mists.

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And whether the lofty trees around wore their first tender green, or were in the full splendour of their later leafage and autumnal glory, or tossing their naked boughs as the winter winds sighed through them, the great Gothic building rose there always, a joy to behold, and a feast for the eyes unchanging in its varying loveliness.

Within, the soul as well as the eye had its feast when the clear trebles of the chorister boys chanted the Psalms, and the organ rolled along the aisles and echoed in the painted roof at Morning Prayer and Evensong.

The library above the Cloisters was naturally a frequent haunt of Master Meredith's. It had been founded by the late good Bishop Jewel, author of the famous *Apology for the Church of England*, and patron of the Judicious Master Hooker and other poor lads of talent whom he had nurtured in his house and sent to Oxford. Master Meredith in his ransackings of the library had discovered a rare illuminated Romish missal beneath a service book of the Reformed Church which was pasted over it. The hand of some diligent monk hundreds of years ago, perchance at Wilton or Ivy Church, had wrought those wondrous symbols in the margin on a background of shining gold, saints and devils, strange beasts and flowers. Amongst these last were the columbines in

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purple and pink such as grew in Master Meredith's knots, and methought in most of the gardens round about Salisbury, and were carved in stone on the tomb of a bishop in the nave.

Sometimes Master Meredith would leave me to wander alone among the effigies and chantries, and when he came back to fetch me he would always find me beside my favourite William Longespée, first Earl of Salisbury and son of hapless Fair Rosamund.

He lay with so much stateliness and grace in his chain armour, with the six leopards on his shield, that had he been on his feet he might easily have been compared with Peter Vischer's King Arthur in that noble company of stone heroes standing round the tomb of Maximilian at Innsbruck.

Then there was the curious dwarfish monument of the Boy Bishop in his robes, and I shuddered when I looked on the silken rope which had hung the murderer Lord Stourton in the market-place, and now dangled in the form of a noose above the spot where his dishonoured bones rested.

I remember the day in the year 1601, when all these tombs and the pillars of the fair cathedral church were hung with heavy sable draperies, and the body of the Earl of Pembroke was brought thither, to be laid amongst the dead in a vault beneath the stones of the choir. It was a solemn day of mourning, albeit

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nature was pranked out in the green and gold of the spring-time, and the blossoming hawthorn hedges gave a bridal look to the world. Little had I seen or known of my Lord the Earl, perchance having only seen, much less exchanged speech with him, on one or two occasions. He, having held the office of Lord Warden of the Welsh marches in succession to Sir Henry Sidney, the father of his Countess, had sojourned more at Ludlow Castle with his son Philip than at Wilton House. Yet he was held in high honour and esteem in his English home, and was known to be an upright landlord and a munificent patron of the arts and letters; and 'twas a long black procession of mourners of both high and low degree which followed his hearse through the flowering lanes to his grave in the Cathedral. My Lord's servants, the company of players he had maintained, bore his coffin, and my Lord Bishop Cotton (he who had had nineteen children by one wife) read the burial service over him—those most grave and beautiful words I had first heard in English in the musical strains of dear Master Meredith's voice as he buried some humble parishioner in the quiet graveyard of Burcombe. But from now onwards I was to associate them chiefly with that scene which stands forth with some others so distinctly in my memory now that I am drawing near the eventide of life.

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The rooks were cawing without as they wheeled about the spire, and the sunlight streaming through the chancel windows dyed the stone floor with hues of ruby, amethyst and topaz. It illumined my lady's beautiful Sidney hair till it shone like an aureole about her shapely head, as she stood erect at the open grave of her husband, calm and dignified in this sorrow as one who had known many bereavements and come through great tribulation. Beside her was her eldest son William, now Earl of Pembroke and Lord of Wilton and the fair heritage of the Herberts. Never had this mother and son, methought, looked so tall of stature as they did in their weeds of black ; never nobler or more goodly in their bearing. The Earl indeed bore himself as one who knew, even thus early, that his new position, howsoever brilliant, would have its duties as well as its pleasures. Yet despite his great gravity and dignity of mien, my Lord acted for a moment as simply as a child. He did lay his hand in his mother's when they advanced to the edge of the grave together to take a last look therein and pressed his cheek against her shoulder just as the little Will might have done who at seven years old had romped and played at bears with his heroic uncle Philip.

But 'tis not for this that I linger on the burial of the old Earl. Rather would I hasten to record how I then saw for the first time, amongst those gathered

Salisbury Cathedral

together in Salisbury Cathedral to honour the dead and to show sympathy with the bereaved, Master William Shakespeare, greatest of dramatists, who had come out of London for that purpose.

That wondrous face drew my eyes like a magnet, and when once they had lighted on it, they could scarce look away. Was it because I knew of the transcendent genius within that the aspect of Shakespeare's outer man affected me so extraordinarily? I fancied the white dome-like brow towered above all others present, that the eyes with their calm, grand outlook could see, if they so listed, into the hearts and souls of those around him. The sunlight streamed on Master Shakespeare's head, and his scant hair and pointed beard, fine as silk, shone like the golden hilt of his sword. Methought it was a mightier head than Jupiter's, and had performed greater miracles than giving birth to the goddess Minerva, for had not the Prince of Denmark, the Jew and the Merchant of Venice, the lovers Romeo and Juliet, Beatrice and Benedick, and a score of others, entered the crucible of his brain, mere puppets of thrice-told tales, and come forth fresh and alive, and touched by the divine fire equipped with immortality?

Ere he left Wilton, I caught another glimpse of Master Shakespeare talking beneath the beeches of Sir Philip's Avenue with my Lord Pembroke, his arm flung about his neck.

Salisbury Cathedral

Ambrosia and I were coming home from primrosing in Grantly Woods, our aprons were laden with flowers, and we had taken a path that skirted the high ground of the Park. Unseen we could see the pair beneath the trees.

"Methinks their love for each other passeth the love of women," I said half to myself, but Ambrosia heard and for a moment her eyes flashed angrily. Then she paused and began tearing the petals from a flower as country maidens do.

"He loves me, he loves me not!". . . With "he loves me not" Ambrosia came to the last petal and threw the dismantled flower away.

She looked down the slope where the figures of the two friends showed 'twixt the trees. The Park rang with the jocund song of blackbirds and thrushes. But Ambrosia, young and radiant as the spring itself, turned to follow me with a heavy step.

"Would I were Master Shakespeare," she murmured with a deep-drawn sigh.

XI

REMINISCENCES AT IVY CHURCH

IN the early weeks of her widowhood Lady Pembroke asked Master Meredith's leave for me to attend her to Ivy Church Manor, on the other side of Salisbury.

My guardian readily gave his consent, and 'twas my felicity to tarry with the Countess more than a month in the ancient monastic house, standing on a fair hill, which her late Lord had bequeathed to her, doubtless for the reason that the spot was so endeared to his lady through association with her brother and their Arcadian summer.

Yet 'twas said that the Earl had left the Countess as "bare as he could" in moneys and jewels.

"She was his third wife," Master Meredith said, as if in explanation, "and maybe the vast affection my lady continued to lavish on her brother's memory, so long after his death, was somewhat begrudged by her husband." Whether or no this was true, it would seem indeed that her present sorrow had brought

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back vivid recollections of her past grief, and at Ivy Church she discoursed to me more than ever before of Sir Philip, and I was a willing listener, for, to me, as to her, in the words of her elegy, aught so divine could not die.

“Ah no, it is not dead, nor can it die,
But lives for aye in blissful Paradise.”

Perchance it soundeth extravagant to say this, I who had never beheld him in the flesh. But I had seen him first with my father's eyes, and now I saw him with hers, which was to see him in troth through the medium of a most perfect and undying love.

My lady brought with her to Ivy Church Manor but few servants and only two of her gentlewomen, the Ladies Frances and Rosamund Clifford, a page, and a secretary and myself.

Greatly to my happiness it fell to my lot to spare the secretary a part of his duties, and I writ much to the Countess's dictation; she being pleased to commend my penmanship as she did my reading.

The Countess was not one to shun sunshine and the beauties of God's fair world because she wore mourning. She would come forth from her bed-chamber at Ivy Church to take the air when “the morning did strew roses and violets on the heavenly floor against the coming of the sun,” and oftentimes spent the whole day till after sunset in the woods or fields.

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Never were such sweet pastures and primrose-starred lawns as here, such coppices of hazel, and woods floored with the heavenly blue of the wild hyacinth, the scent of which the spring breezes wafted into the antique chambers of the gabled house, with its thick stone walls so stained and withal beautified by the hand of time. The outer wall of all, which enclosed the paved yard and pleasance and kitchen garden and the little disused chapel with its belfry and figures of saints in the niches, was not built of mud, and thatched, after the pattern of Wiltshire farmers' walls, but of mellow brick aglow with orange lichen and crowned with diadems of gillyflowers fit for a king.

We were further from the vast treeless downs here than at home, but we saw them rolling away on the other side of the vale, and here as there the spire of Sarum never let its height be forgot, for 'twas seen piercing the sky above green bowers at every turn ; ethereal and lace-like, as if fashioned by divine and not human hands.

There was a sundial painted above the entrance of the house, and another carven on a stone pedestal in the pleasance with a Latin motto thereon, which had reminded the monks who once paced its paths that they were naught but passing shadows. Substantial shadows methought they must have been with their trout-streams, and fish-ponds, and heavily-laden fruit

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trees, and farmyard stocked with fat capons and turkeys.

Near the house, but beyond the outer wall, was a kind of artificially wild heath, where 'twixt clumps of strawberry blossom grew thyme, rosemary, and divers sweet-smelling herbs which perfumed the Countess's trailing weeds as she went to a favourite rustic seat to read and work. I sat one fair evening on the bank at her feet with the *Arcadia* open on my knee at the very page wherein the "delightful prospects" around us were described with such exactness that I will quote the passage rather than attempt to give an impression of the landscape in mine own words:

"There were hills which garnished their proud heights with stately trees ; humble vallies whose base estate seemed comforted with the refreshing of silver rivers : meadows enamelled with all sorts of eye-pleasing flowers ; thickets which being lined with most pleasant shade were witnessed so too by the cheerful disposition of many well-tuned birds ; each pasture stored with sheep, feeding with sober security, while the pretty lambs with bleating outcry craved the dam's comfort : here a shepherd's boy piping, as though he never should be old, there a young shepherdess knitting and withal singing : and it seemed that her voice comforted her hands to work, and her

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hands kept time to her voice music. . . . As for the houses of the country, they were all scattered, no two being one by the other, and yet not so far off that it barred mutual succour; a show as it were of a companionable solitariness and of a civil wildness."

I think my lady's thoughts went back more than ever in those days to "the April of her prime." Often did she speak to me of her introduction to the splendours of Elizabeth's Court under the ægis of her uncle Leicester, then the most brilliant and beloved of all Her Majesty's favourites. In her lovely, joyous youth she too had enjoyed the whirl of gaities and merrymaking in which the Queen passed her days and nights, the dancing and masking, tilts, and tournaments and progresses, but Mary Sidney had never neglected her graver pursuits, and in this had the example ever before her of the beloved brother, leader and "bright particular star" in the gay doings of the Court, yet at the same time the earnest student, the correspondent of Languet, of whom he writ, when the venerable scholar died at Antwerp:—

"With his sweet skill my skillless youth he drew
To have a feeling taste of Him that sits
Beyond the heaven, far more beyond our wits.

He said the music best such powers pleased,
Was sweet accord between our wit and will,

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Where highest notes to godliness are raised,
And lowest sink not down to jot of ill;
With old true tales he wont my ears to fill
How shepherds did of yore, how now they thrive,
Spoiling their flocks, or while 'twixt them they strive."

As she reclined on that bank of wild thyme and rosemary in her mourning habit, her long white never-idle fingers busied with some fine needle-work, the Countess made my eyes ope wide with wonder, as she related the famous display of chivalry which Sir Philip had prepared to the honour of the French envoys, after he had made his peace with the Queen and withdrawn his opposition to her talked-of match with the Duke of Anjou. The tilt-yard of Whitehall had been transformed into the Fortress of Perfect Beauty, the allegorical abode of the Queen, which proved impregnable to an assault lasting two days.

"He rid into the lists the first day," said the Countess, looking up from her work as if she beheld him before her in all his bravery and gallantry, "with armour part blue, and the rest gilt and engraven, and he had four spare horses caparisoned very richly, and the four pages who rid on them were attired in cassock coats and Venetian hose of cloth of silver laced with gold, and hats of the same with gold bands and white feathers, and besides he had thirty gentlemen and yeomen, four trumpeters in Venetian yellow hose laid with silver lace, yellow

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velvet caps with silver bands and white feathers, and every one a pair of white buskins, and a scroll of silver, worn scarf-wise, bore the posy written on't both before and behind, 'Sic nos non nobis.' Such a show was costly, and what wonder if Philip exceeded his slender fortune in defraying the expenses of these pageants? Our dear father, Sir Henry Sidney, felt direfully the pinch of poverty, despite his high position and public services in Ireland and Wales, for which Her Majesty did not requite him in moneys."

She sighed, and the sadness of her face deepened into distress, while she went on to speak of how onerous and also how tedious the round of Court pleasures had become to Sir Philip, how fain he would have filled some post which would not have meant ease and unearned riches, but labour, finding its reward in the good done for others. How he too had spread his wings yearningly towards those new countries beyond the Atlantic. On the far stage of America, he was ambitious, as others were, to win fame, and had gotten thirty gentlemen of great blood and state here in England, each to sell one hundred pounds' worth of land for fitting out a fleet, and when all was ready, and he on the eve of starting forth in joint command with Sir Francis Drake of the expedition, the summons came to him to go into the

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Low Countries under the Earl of Leicester, and he sacrificed all his darling plans instantly to the duty of obedience. "At Flushing there was no field for the exercise of his talents and powers," the Countess said. "'Twas scantily garrisoned, and he found himself in command of insufficient and mutinous troops. He grew impatient of the campaign dragging on so slowly, and of the banquets and intrigues which interfered with honest warfare."

"But, madam," I dared put in, "'twas the field of his eternal glory . . . Zutphen." For a moment she dropped her work in her lap and twined her hands together, almost wringing them, and her eyes gazed beyond me so full of piteous memories, that I was half affrighted at what I had said till she spoke again, and then I was no longer sorry that I had mentioned Zutphen.

For the first time since she had favoured me with her sweet intimacy, I now heard her allude to her brother's last heroic act of unselfishness, when his thirsty lips refused the bottle of water which another poor wounded wretch had craved upon the battlefield with suffering, dying eyes.

"Thy necessity is yet greater than mine."

Simple words, faintly uttered, that have echoed since through the world, and will live in history so long as history lasts.

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To hear her who had been so near, so much a part of his heart, repeat those words—the clear, rich tones of her voice breaking as she did so—was to me like the last dying chords of some soul-piercing melody played on the lute.

Another day, when 'twas too stormy to sit and work in the open air, my lady bid me pace with her the little cloisters, and then came to talk of Sir Philip, on his death-bed, in the whitewashed chamber of the Dutch lady's house at Arnheim. She told me many things that I had not known—perforce could not have known—till I heard them from her. For twenty-five days did he lie patiently there, with his young wife, his brother Robin, and sundry divines and surgeons watching around him. He bore with sweet fortitude long and painful operations on his wound, and held discourses on religion and the future of the soul. On the sixteenth day his very shoulder-blades had worn through the delicate skin. But he so loved life that he did not despair of it till nigh the last. He bethought him of a famous physician, John Wier, who was his friend, and writ eagerly in Latin :

“Mi Wiere, veni, veni. De vitâ periclitor et te cupio. Nec vivus, nec mortuus, ero ingratus. Plura non possum sed obnixè oro ut festines. Vale. Tuus PH. SIDNEY.”

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"My dear friend Wier. Come, come! I am in peril of my life, and long for you. Neither living nor dead shall I be ungrateful. I cannot write more, but beg you urgently to hurry. Farewell. Your PH. SIDNEY."

The flame of hope died down with the flickering flame of life. He made his will and revised it, for he would forget none of his old friends and servants. "Sickness and pain could not narrow his large and sweet affections."

"All things in my former life have been vain, vain, vain, vain!" said he, when he was dying; and into the ears of his brother, who could not restrain his grief, his last words were breathed. "Love my memory, cherish my friends; their faith to me may assure you they were honest. But above all, govern your will and affections by the will and word of your Creator; in me beholding the end of the world and also its vanities."

Then had followed that unparalleled outburst of public sorrow throughout Europe, for those who had never seen him had recognized him as the ideal and most perfect gentleman of his time.

The fair, admired body from which the fairer soul had fled was brought over sea to England with military honours. But it lay on Tower Hill unburied from November till February. Even now the

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Countess could not refrain from shedding bitter tears when she recalled the cause of that distressing delay.

“The outcry of his creditors was such that the funeral could not take place till his debts had been discharged,” she said. “He had made provision for all, in his will, by the sale of lands, but his wishes could not for some legal reason be carried out. When at last the obstacles were removed, he was borne, with splendid pomp, to St. Paul’s, and the whole nation went into mourning. ’Twas accounted a sin for any gentleman of quality to appear in light or gaudy apparel at Court or in the City for months afterwards.”

I had heard both my father and Master Meredith talk of that marvellously solemn State funeral, where Sir Philip Sidney was carried with high pomp to the Lady Chapel in great St. Paul’s, attended by all the nobility, judges, serjeants-at-law, soldiers, commanders and liverymen. An English merchant friend of my father’s in Antwerp had, over his chimney-piece, the whole picture of the procession, engraved and printed on papers pasted together of great length. It was twined on two pins, and the turning of one made the figures seem to march in order. It had made a great impression on my childish fantasy at the time I had been shown it,

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and it came clearly back to me when at Ivy Church the Countess described her brother's funeral to me so soon after the interment of the Earl, her husband, in Salisbury Cathedral, as if the one sad event had freshened her memory of the other.

Whilst she conversed to me thus seriously my lady's young gentlewomen and page would be disporting themselves in the cowslip-fields not far away, and their voices and laughter often came to us merrily on the wings of the wind. The Countess was not minded to check their mirth. Said she:

“All young things are not cast in so grave and thoughtful a mould as thou art, little Jeanne. How you drink in what I relate! Your small, pale face turned up to mine seemeth to reflect on the instant, like a mirror, every fleeting thought and emotion of my mind as I speak. 'Tis a rare gift thou hast—the gift of perfect sympathy, little one. Never lose it, and the power of effacing thyself in others' joys and sorrows. Frances Walsingham was just such another pale, slender, soft-eyed maid as thou to look upon when she became Philip's bride; but methinks the resemblance 'twixt you was but on the surface. Frances broke her heart, 'tis true, in that death-chamber at Arnheim. Aye, but had it been your true little heart, no other hero could have mended it, methinks. Yet 'twas only natural poor Frances should

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let herself be consoled, after what would seem to many a long enow period of mourning. She was so very young. Her second widowhood hath, however, truly been more tragical than the first."

Indeed it had, thought I, remembering how my Lord of Essex had first lost the love of his Queen and the favours which had been so generously heaped upon him from his boyhood, and then after wild revolt and piteous pleadings had lost his proud rash head. Infinitely more terrible must it have been to see one's husband perish on the scaffold for treason, than to pass away on an honourable sick-bed as Sir Philip had done.

"If I had been his wife for a day or even an hour," I said, "never could I have wed afterwards with another. I should have mourned him for ever and ever."

I blushed hotly at my bold speech, but the Countess patted my head, and, as she rose from the bank to which we had come from the Cloisters, plucked a sprig of rosemary and gave it to me.

"How the bees love this herb, and 'tis the one sacred to remembrance, as poor, crazed Ophelia singeth. Take it then as thy fitting emblem, little Jeanne, whose memory clingeth so loyally to all thou admirest and lov'st."

I laid the herb within the fold of my kerchief, and now it lieth dry and withered within the pages of my

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father's *Plato*, where I placed it on my return to Burcombe beside the Fair Maid of France Master Meredith gathered for me, the first time that he showed me his garden.

For a few moments my lady paused, her tall figure outlined in its black against the sky, over which the wind chased the feathery fleeting clouds, gazing at the prospect.

From where we stood we overlooked all the green country westward and north over Sarum, and close in the east was the royal Park of Clarendon, with its delicious sylvan glades and groves.

"See the rainbow? At eventide it shall be light," the Countess said.

Since we had ventured forth from the Cloisters, the stormy sky had changed its aspect, and now the west was streaked with daffodil, and the Cathedral showing forth silvery grey, with the great rainbow circled above it.

The Countess watched the bright colours grow softer and fainter till at last they melted away, then she turned suddenly, and looking up at the hills behind us, said:

"The lines writ by one Master Matthew Roydon come into my head, and I fancy I see Philip as I have seen him many times come down yonder winding glittering path."

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I said I did not know the verses, and my lady quoted them :

“Within the woods of Arcady
He chief delight and pleasure took,
And on the mountain Partheny
Upon the crystal liquid brook,
The Muses met him every day
That taught him sing, to write and say.

When he descended down the mount,
His personage seemed most divine ;
A thousand graces one might count
Upon his lovely, cheerful eyne ;
To hear him speak and sweetly smile,
You were in Paradise the while.”

Methought the Master Roydon who penned these stanzas was one of the numerous friends, poets and others, whom the dying Sir Philip had bid his brother cherish for his sake.

I know not how far his brother, Sir Robert Sydney, had obeyed the command, but should he have neglected it altogether, this I knew, that his sister had amply atoned for his negligence. “Sons of the Muses,” from the highest to the lowest, were taken to her generous soul, if they possessed the passport of having known “gentle Sir Philip,” of whom one of them exclaimed, choosing prose rather than verse for his lamentation :

“Thou knewest what belonged to a scholar ; thou knewest what pains, what toil, what travail conduct to perfection ; well couldst thou give every virtue his

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encouragement ; every art his due ; every writer his desert ; because none more virtuous, witty or learned than thyself. But thou art dead in thy grave, and hast left too few successors of thy glory."

The best and dearest of his friends, Sir Fulke Greville, who had been bred up with him at school, and his inseparable at Court, seemed now but to live for the one object of perpetuating his memory. My lady returned to Wilton from Ivy Church to receive a visit from him, and Sir Edward Dyer the poet, another member of Sir Philip's Parnassus, author of one immortal line of song at least, Master Meredith said :

"My mind to me a kingdom is."

I heard these gentlemen converse one evening with the Countess, in that chamber, which was to me a sanctuary, off the long gallery, where were her needle-work pictures and her copies of the *Arcadia*. And methought their conversation was like a chain on which each in turn hung some bead of reminiscence. It was always a word, an act, a prank of Sir Philip's they recalled—sometimes with laughter, sometimes with tears. As I listened, I felt 'twas true that one whose memory was kept thus ever fresh and green in the hearts of those he had left behind, who had known and so dearly loved him, could not die, but lived on even for those who had known him not.

XII

HOW NAT CAME HOME AT CHRISTMAS

THE Yule-tide after my old Lord of Pembroke's death was celebrated at Wilton very quietly, without the customary wassailings and junketings, out of respect to his memory and his lady's grief. The snow lay thick on the Downs, and the park and great house had the appearance of being asleep in their shroud of purest white.

Fine powdery snow had been falling the day Ambrosia and I wrapped ourselves in our hooded cloaks to meet Nat and Philip Massinger [at the cross-roads below Fulestone on their way home from Oxford. 'Twas the last time these two rid the homeward road together, for during their Oxford life the comrades had become more and more estranged till they were comrades no longer.

It was not surprising that it should be so. Philip had chosen to live laborious days and advance himself on the path of learning, so that he had won distinction in his studies and the praise and esteem of his tutors and patrons. He had taken as his

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pattern belike Chaucer's Clerk of Oxenford, and would have had liefer at his bed's head "Twenty books clad in black or red of Aristotle and his philosophy" than rich and fine apparel. But Nat had taken another way. Too soon had he found out that at Oxford, as elsewhere, one is not obliged to be diligent in study if the will and inclination are lacking. Dogs and horses could be kept there for sport, and there was rowing on the river, archery and skittles, cockfighting, dicing and tables. By degrees, Nat began to spend on these not only his spare time and money, but the time that he should have given to his book, and the money which he had not got, following the example of other sparkish lads who were careless alike of their future and their fathers' fortunes.

It was a sore trouble to Master Meredith when the first time of reckoning came and he had to pay his son's debts, and hear that he had neglected his studies for the follies and pleasures of wild youth. Yet after this had happened more than once Master Meredith did not despair, for Nat always professed penitence and promised to amend his ways—a promise he would keep for a while. Nat's tutor at Oriel agreed with his father that Nat was no fool, but had good ability when he liked to employ it, and could display it both in Latin and Greek and the Mathematics. So Master Meredith, mistakenly, I verily believe, hoped

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on for that final amendment in his son which would result in his devoting himself with zeal at last to the pursuit of either the law or theology.

Hitherto when Nat had come to Burcombe for his vacations, he had never worn any air of being in disgrace, or showed signs in his manners of having suffered from the ill company with which he associated. Lithe, active, and gay, ever with a laugh and jest on his lips, he had come home to the sister who so strongly resembled him, and they were overjoyed to be together again, and she was his shadow as of old, following him like his dog over field and dyke and down. They were children of Nature, and would never have been aught but children, had the nomad instincts they had gotten from their gipsy mother had full play, and not been at war with the duties and responsibilities which confronted them in their relationship with their father.

Methinks they were born to a life of untrammelled freedom in the open air, and had they been able to live under the wide-stretching canopy of the sky or beneath the over-arching boughs of the forest, seasons and years, the winds and rains of heaven, might have passed over them till threescore-and-ten without ageing them. They would still have been careless and joyous at heart.

To Ambrosia the music made by the winds in the

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trees was more than it was to me. To me 'twas simply music, but she could distinguish the voice of the beech from that of the oak, and in a storm could tell the part every small bush and twig played in the great harmony. She sang strange songs which she said the wind had taught her, and the wild flowers spoke to her in their own language.

Why then, asked she, should she toil to get perfect an air out of Master William Byrd's "Psalms, Sonnets, and Songs" on the lute, or to make the saucy jacks of the virginal leap in time? She understood a grander, more mighty instrument. To quote Master Shakespeare again—

"The music of the spheres"

was the music Ambrosia had learned without being taught.

The rustling river, the babbling brooks and streamlets, as well as the birds, sang to her fantastic tales of nixies and fairyland which she could interpret by words. Therefore she cared naught or little for the tales within the covers of books which contained for me such boundless realms of delight.

Nat had shared with her to the full this curious intimacy with the secrets of their mother earth, and her love of birds and beasts and innocent sports.

Each time he had come back to her, she had found

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him unchanged, and she saw no fault in him. She idolized him not a whit the less for the scrapes and debts he had gotten into when away, and would fain lay the blame for these on her father, rather than on the culprit himself.

"It's father's own fault," I have heard her say. "He knew Nat wanted to go over sea and to travel in strange countries, and he should have let him go. He is too strong and lusty and full of life to be a scholar, a lawyer, or a parson. Fancy Nat preaching sermons!"

But Ambrosia's contentment with her brother was to receive its first shock that snowy Christmas-tide to which I have come in this narrative. I marked the change at once in Nat, so soon as he jumped from his horse at the cross-roads, and threw his reins to Luke. Ambrosia stooped to gather covertly the crisp snow into a ball with her hands, then flung it at sedate Philip Massinger's neck, as after greeting her he turned to ride through the gates of Wilton.

"See, I have snow-balled the great coming dramatist," she said, looking to Nat for a gay laugh and hearty approval of her action.

He laughed this time, 'tis true, but so loudly and discordantly that both Ambrosia and I looked at him wondering for a moment whether it was really Nat's laugh that had sounded thus in the cold clear air.

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And as we both looked at him, I knew that she, as well as I, noticed the difference in his mien, though belike neither of us could have described what that difference exactly was.

'Twas not that he was less brilliant or less comely, but something was gone from his face that had given it its chief boyish charm, and something had come into it which we had not seen there before.

Old Luke led the horses up the hill and Nat walked betwixt us. The fine snow met our faces like little pine-needles, and we crunched it under our feet.

"Snow-balling, meseemeth," Nat said, "will be the only pastime at Wilton this dull winter; what with the frost preventing the hunt out-of-doors, and my Lord's mourning hindering the play-acting within."

"Welladay, you and I will find plenty of amusement I warrant, for all that," Ambrosia said. Pushing back her hood, she rubbed her cheek against his shoulder, but instead of throwing his arm about her neck as I had seen him do hundreds of times in response to such an endearment, he drew away from her and went on—

"If Wilton is dead-alive, other places not far away will be lively, and I shall betake myself thither."

Ambrosia said she supposed that he meant that he would go to Salisbury every day to play pranks with my Lord Bishop's sons at the Palace.

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“And I will come too,” said she, “and we will have fine sport, belike build a snow-man as tall as the Cathedral, while Father and Dove are burrowing in the booksellers’ shops.”

“But,” said he, “hobbledehoys are no longer to my taste, nor episcopal babes and sucklings. There are gentlemen, merry company that I have become acquainted with at Oxon, who live nearer than Salisbury. My Lord Sturton of Sturton, for instance, and Sir Geoffrey Haynes of Ambresbury. There is no lady of the house in either case, so methinks, Sis, thou’lt have to wish me God-speed when I visit them and stay at home.”

“Certainly, ’twould not be seemly for me to bear you company to Sturton,” Ambrosia said. “Every one knoweth my Lord Sturton to be a gamester and a profligate.”

“Wait till you are invited before you refuse, my disdainful one,” Nat retorted.

Ambrosia dropped his arm and was silent. I knew that she was hurt and that tears were not far behind the blaze of anger in her splendid eyes.

Nat rattled on of the high feasting and gay doings he intended to take a part in at Sturton, and of the guests who were expected there, of one Master George Brooke, brother to Lord Cobham, coming thither, who was equal to any Spanish Don as a rider of the great

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horse, whose goshawk never failed of its prey on the first flight ; and whose luck was such that he cast double sixes at the dice nine times out of ten.

His converse and a certain scoffing tone in his voice jarred on us, and I was thankful that when we reached the Rectory, in Master Meredith's presence, he chose somewhat to alter it. And the rector, well satisfied with an improved report from the tutor of Oriel of Nat's Greek, was disposed to overlook, if he noticed it, any loud recklessness in his speech and behaviour.

Most days Nat now rid out through the snow, and 'twas unknown to his father whither he went, for to him he had breathed naught of his new acquaintances and his visits to the wild revels at Sturton.

For all Master Meredith suspected, Nat might have gone as of old to the steward's house within the gates of the park, to consort with sober Philip Massinger, or to Salisbury to antic with the Bishop's large family of boys.

Ambrosia and I knew, but we kept our own counsel. Ambrosia refrained from opening Master Meredith's eyes, for Nat's sake, and I did so for hers against my conscience and better judgment. I could scarce help hoping that Mrs. Dorcas would say one day to her master what she often muttered to me, as she looked over her large horn-rimmed spectacles after the boy a-riding away :

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“He hath fallen into evil company, and drinketh too much wine.”

But she, too, seemed afraid to speak the truth to him whom it most concerned, and so Master Meredith visited the poor and sick, and writ his sermons and garnered in more knowledge for his unwrit opus, and was the only one in the little household, aye, forsooth in the little hamlet, who was in ignorance of how his son was spending his holiday time.

So things went on till Twelfth Night. On that day the angel of death was hovering over the bed of the aged whilom nun Mistress Alice Langton at the Grange. The long low house and the beehives were almost buried in snow, and icicles in divers fantastic shapes hung glittering from the eaves. From this white, still, muffled world the white soul of old Mistress Alice was at last about to take its flight to another, after its long, long sojourn here on earth.

At noon my lady had come with her physician Dr. Moffat, to pay her last visit to Mistress Alice and had found me sitting beside her, holding the shrivelled hand in mine. On my lap was the fragment of the journal, which that hand had penned when it was firm and young and fair. 'Twas Mistress Alice's sacred bequest to me. I looked up from its perusal as the Countess entered the chamber. In her sable garments she did appear like a vision of night in the

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extreme whiteness of the room, for scarce whiter was the snow without than the sheets which wrapped the shrunken form about, and the starched folds of the coif in which her face was set as in a frame. Mistress Alice had partaken of the holy sacrament some hours before, and since had been drifting dreamily down the valley of the shadow almost unconscious. But when the Countess, sweeping back her veil, kneeled beside the bed and pressed her cheek against the pillow beside her, Mistress Langton smiled and opened her eyes, and they seemed no longer dim. 'Twas as if the clear vision of youth had come back, and maybe as she gazed upwards so earnestly, she thought she beheld awaiting her at heaven's gates the saintly foundress of Wilton Abbey—

“Fair Edith, of womanhood the flower,
And with her a great multitude of other maids also,
Standing all above the church and poised upon the tower.”

I had read about St. Edith's miraculous doings in the manuscript of an old metrical legend preserved in the Cathedral library, of how she had healed the sick, restored the blind to sight, and made the crooked straight, and given to frantic men their wits. For me, apart from its antiquity, it had but the interest of old wives' tales, being a farrago of superstition; but for one who had been born and bred before the great era of enlightenment which dispelled the darkness encom-

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passing the Church, I could well believe 'twas all real and true as the gospels themselves; and such a one was dear old Mistress Alice Langton, for whom the bitterness of dying was sweetened and brightened by the visionary fantasies of her creed.

"My good Dr. Moffat," the Countess said to me before leaving, "thinketh it cannot be long now, but she may live till evening. Canst thou, Jeanne, hold vigil by her so long?"

Aye, I could, most easily and willingly, knowing that I had within call Mrs. Dorcas and the rosy-cheeked serving-women of the Grange so soon as the end came. So they left me. I had no morbid fears of the dying and death, and had been close to my father as he drew his last breath. 'Twixt me and Mistress Alice Langton a tender affection had sprung up from that summer day when I had first met the Countess at the Grange. It always seemed as if the old nun were connected with that most wondrous and happy hour in my life, when the lady whose name in all the world I had most revered from hearsay, so graciously took me, the insignificant little orphaned stranger from over the sea, into her warm and noble heart.

And for her own sake, too, I had gotten to love Mistress Alice—many a pleasant time had I spent

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with her as she hobbled on the sunny terrace, to see the swarming of the bees, or led her up the shady alleys of the maze to the arbour. Winter evenings I had passed on a stool at her knee in the ingle-nook of the tapestry-hung room and hearkened to the dear, quavering old voice relate, in wandering fashion, stories of convent life.

She had talked of fasts and festivals and church pageants, of giving the beggar his daily dole in the almonry, and practising the leech's art in dressing his sores, and of teaching little flaxen-haired boys and girls their letters and horn-book in the convent school. And when the stormy blasts shook the beams and rain and hail rattled against the lattices, she had remembered how benighted wayfarers often had sought the shelter of Holy Edith's sacred roof, and how once the heavy gates had swung back at dead of night to let in one, gallant and noble born, bleeding from a wound, his affrighted horse having thrown him in the storm of thunder and lightning that raged without, and whilst he lay sick for many a day from loss of blood, being tended by the nuns, his beautiful person and subtle, persuasive speech had so won the fairest and youngest of his gentle nurses that she, forgetful of her vows to her Heavenly spouse, stole away with him and was never seen again in Wilton.

How Nat came Home

“And what became of her, where did he take her?” I had not forborne from asking, though knowing well the terrible answer.

“To perdition,” Mistress Alice had said, “to perdition, for not a thousand years of penance could ever absolve her soul from the greatest of all sins.”

I had reminded her of the Divine words, “Thy sins shall be as scarlet, but I will make them as white as snow.” And yet, whensoever I had thought of those fleeing figures, the knight who had so abused the hospitality and care of the good nuns, and the maiden who for love of him had broken her solemn vows, I seemed to see them, hand-in-hand wandering for ever after in weary agony—like Paolo and Francesca through the grey and icy shades of Dante’s Inferno.

I read on in the journal, while daylight lasted, and the writer thereof slumbered peacefully away the last lingering hours of her life, a life which had in reality ended its activity long ago. As I read, I felt that a voice that was silent would speak to me again, so often as I turned the yellowing pages, writ in the fine clear penmanship that, methought, some still living might have imitated with labour and tears in their copy-books, when their chubby baby-fingers were first taught to guide a quill by the nuns of Wilton.

XIII

FROM MISTRESS LANGTON'S LIBELLUS

Candlemas, 1539.—Now that the quiet days in this my cell are numbered, and I must soon prepare to go forth from it for ever, meseemeth I have at last something to indite in these the empty pages of my Libellus.

Something other than the record of fasts, vigils and festivals, as they have come round, like as the days and years have run their course.

I have seen, methinks, our last procession of candles and lanterns winding through the cloister to the church. And even as we passed thither, with the soft radiance of the lighted tapers falling on our habits and the white veils of the novices, which of us guessed that ere we returned to our cells, we should have learned our doom? But so 'twas to be. The Reverend Mother did assemble us in Chapter after mass, and told us that this our loved home, our fair and far-famed Religious House, must be surrendered unto His Majesty King Henry. Ere another Candlemas, nay, ere the next Feast of the Annunciation of our

From Mistress Langton's Libellus

Blessed Lady, all will be over. So soon sacrilegious hands will be laid on our statues, pictures and missals, and the greed of the King's servants seek to satisfy itself with the seizure of our lands and chattels. We shall all be scattered. My Lady Abbess seemeth to have yielded without a struggle, faint-heartedly enow to the spoiler.

Master Hector, the sacristan, told Sister Gertrude that our Abbess will have her reward therefor, in a fine manor-house and a goodly stipend. Sister Gertrude, Sister Winifred and others will journey home to their parents. But what of us who have no parents, whose only home, till we exchanged it for a heavenly one, was to have been within these holy walls? Truly we may say the birds have nests, the foxes their lairs, but we no place to rest our heads.

The Vigil of St. Scholastica.—They have come hither and gone, His Majesty's commissioners, and our fate is indeed sealed! To-day, many who have received spiritual comfort under this blessed roof, or bodily relief, came unto the almonry to give us their sympathy. They did thank us for having taught their little ones to lisp their beads, and spell their horn-books, and each brought with him some small gift for remembrance, such as a garden-posy tied with a riband, a pie-dish of quinces, a silver apostle-spoon, or antique carven

From Mistress Langton's Libellus

rosary. And when they bid us farewell their voices were choked with tears.

March.—The evil day of going forth drawing nearer and nearer, I am almost persuaded by Sister Agnes to go hence with her and some others oversea into France, where she knoweth we may be received by the Reverend Mother of our order, at the convent of the Sacré Cœur, near unto Calais.

Yet how can I tear myself from this my native soil, the spot where all my life hath been past, where I have lived through my dearest joys and bitterest sorrow? Beneath the green sward of Wilton churchyard, side by side, lie the dear ones who gave me life. In the lane without Fulestone Chapel, when the birds were pairing in the branches on the feast of good Bishop Valentine, the patron saint of lovers, I plighted my troth with my boy-lover—the rosy, fair-haired lad who bid me a tender farewell that sunny morn at the stile by the babbling trout-stream, to seek his fortunes beyond the sea, but found instead an early grave in the ocean's depth. 'Twas thus the promise of my May-time was blighted, and my young affections weaned from the world and the things that perish, and I passed within these gates to become Christ's bride, instead of being wed to an earthly bridegroom. True solace hath been mine, in the contemplation of the Passion of our divine Lord,

From Mistress Langton's Libellus

in the services of the Church and the fulfilment of my duties as a member of sainted Edith's sisterhood. Aye, but at this hour of disruption my heart faileth me for fear. Where can I turn my footsteps? Dare I trust myself to cross the silver thread, as Sister Agnes jestingly calleth the Channel, knowing it to be part of that mighty treacherous monster, the cruel sea which stole my love and swallowed my carnal happiness? Methinks I dread such a journey more than tongue can tell or pen indite.

Eve of Our Lady's Day.—This is the last time I shall enter my cell after vespers, and take up my quill to write. This forenoon the Reverend Mother gave each of us her parting blessing, and we assembled at the grated gates to watch her carried out of our sight in a gay-cushioned litter, in which she was to be borne to her fine manor-house. Methought the heaviness of her countenance was somewhat of a mask, and that 'twould clear ere she had travelled many a mile. I turned from the gates to pluck in the sheltered corner of the cloister pleasance a marigold, which ever bloometh out of season at Our-Lady-tide. I did place it in my breviary opposite the page which hath an illuminated miniature of the Blessed Virgin in a blue mantle seated at a table reading, and the angel Gabriel standing beside her with gold wings and a fleur-de-lis on his sceptre.

From Mistress Langton's Libellus

We have said good-bye to all. Where shall we be, poor outcasts, this time on the morrow?

St. Barnabas.—The saints ordained that I should not travel into France with Sister Agnes, and I now open this Libellus once more in the home of one of my whilom scholars. A very pleasant white homestead 'tis, on the green uplands above Wilton, near the dear scenes of my upbringing and old religious life. 'Twas on the morn of the Annunciation Feast, so fraught with doom for us, that I mounted into the waggon with Sister Agnes and two others, feeling most forlorn, sad and heartsick withal, to take the road to the sea-coast. Nigh beggared, we had scarce any stuff to bring away, naught save the garments on our back, our breviaries, rosaries, and two golden angels betwixt us. The day was chilly and drear, and as we came unto Sarum, the roaring winds of March swept the dust in our faces, but, looking up, I saw a sun-beam stray forth from the grey clouds and catch the spire, so that it did seem to smile down on us with the friendly smile of a guardian angel. And then—methinks 'twas indeed a miracle worked by Holy St. Edith for my weal—there came towards us on the road the figure of a tall, sturdy yeoman, carrying on his shoulder a little lad, so that he reminded me of the blessed Saint Christopher, and, trotting at his side, who should it be but my little scholar, Joyce Penfold.

From Mistress Langton's Libellus

I know not exactly how it happened, but Joyce danced before the waggon and it halted, and in another minute I was no longer seated at Sister Agnes's side, but standing in the road with my little friend's hand in mine, and she was petitioning me with tears not to go away. "Good Sister Alice must tarry with us, dear father," said little Joyce. "We can ill spare her, lest we grow up dunces."

"Aye, 'tis true, we cannot let Sister Alice go forth into the wilderness," spake St. Christopher. "Thy mother will not lightly forgive us, Joyce, if we forbear from bringing her home to live in our house to train thy brother and thyself aright in lore and learning."

And so sending up an ave for very thankfulness, I turned and in their company set my face towards the familiar hills again instead of towards the sea. And on this, the longest day of summer, as I sit here at the vesper hour in my chamber there cometh through the casement on the calm sweet air homely scents and sounds,—the lowing of the kine, the voices of my bright-haired scholars at play in the hay-meadows ; but, alack, no sound of bell ringing for evensong, and although the dear monastic rooks blacken the sky and caw as of old, the well-beloved towers above which they were wont to wheel are seen no more 'twixt the trees, for the sacred house lieth in ruins. *Ave atque Vale.*

XIV

AN ENCOUNTER IN THE SNOW

As I came forth from the Grange into the snowy lanes I felt as if I had quitted some holy shrine, and my mood was very serious though scarcely sad, for the peaceful passing of a soul in ripe old age and the odour of sanctity, like dear Mistress Langton's, is no cause for weeping.

The moon shone with such a brilliant silver radiance that I dismissed the Grange serving-woman who held a lantern before me, and said that I could find my way to the Rectory alone.

'Twas but a few paces, yet far enough for something to befall me which I never forgot. Coming beneath the churchyard wall, a snatch of ribald song fell jarringly on my ears so attuned to the solemn sounds and silence of the chamber from which I had come, and where I had been watching in my turn since early morn.

For a moment I did not recognize the voice, and thinking 'twas some stray twelfth-night wassailer

An Encounter in the Snow

I was taking to my heels in a fright when I was caught hold of from behind.

“Nay, thou shan’t escape, though thou canst run like a hare.”

And now I saw to my indignant surprise that ’twas Nat who had thus dared rudely to lay hands on me as if I were some light village wench. Methought indeed he took me for such, till he added :

“Hare—’tis no hunted hare, but a dove! The softest, whitest little dove in the world, whom I would fain soothe on my bosom if she would let me.”

I wrenched myself in disgust from his arms, and as I faced him in the moonlight I saw how flushed he was, how disordered his hair and dress, how bold and strange the look of his eye.

He staggered towards me again with arms outstretched. “I love my little quiet dove, why does she peck? Come, come to me, sweetheart, I love you—”

So these were the first words of love I was to hear; thus disgracefully was I to be wooed, I who, perchance, had often dreamed my shy dream of love, and trembled at the thought of the day when aught so sacred and beautiful should come to me—me, and now it had come in this unseemly fashion!

In my exceeding wrath and outraged maidenly pride I forgot that Nat was scarce in a condition to know what he said or did. “Do not come near

An Encounter in the Snow

me," I cried, "I hate you! I hate you! You come from your cups, your dicing, chambering and wantoning in the house of my Lord Sturton, and dare to molest a maid living under your father's roof. You coward! If you touch me again, or come a step of the way with me, I will cry shame on you with all the strength of my lungs."

He laughed foolishly, threw his arms in the air and resumed his singing.

"Hush, hush, Mistress Alice Langton lieth dead in the Grange," I said.

He appeared to steady himself and try to speak more coherently than he had done hitherto.

"One of the jades my Lord Pembroke's great-grandsire told to go spin, eh? 'Go spin, ye jades,' he told 'em, when they were turned out of their nunnery—Ha ha!" With this insult to the dead he lunged forward again, and pushing him from me with both hands, he stumbled and fell full length in the snow.

I fled from him, never pausing till I reached the Rectory parlour where an untasted supper lay on the board and Ambrosia sat by the glowing hearth with a puppy in her lap, a successor of the vixen who long ago had come to an untimely end.

"Where is Master Meredith?" I asked.

She looked up at me, and her eyes grew scared and her bright colour seemed to ebb as if I frightened her.

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“Why do you ask?” she said, “you knew that he was called up to the Downs to see old Ben the sick shepherd.”

“Well, on his way home he will belike find his son lying ’twixt here and the Grange, on his back, senseless in the snow.”

“Nat, Nat! You have seen Nat lying in the snow!” she exclaimed, casting the puppy from her and running wildly to the door.

I told her what had passed in the lane. She wrung her hands. Her one anxiety was that Nat should be gotten into the house before Master Meredith came home.

“Luke and I must go and bring him in and carry him to bed,” she said; “father shall not see him if I can help it.”

She called old Luke and set about the task of screening her brother with such a will that she succeeded in her purpose. Nat was safely a-bed before Master Meredith, cold and weary, rid into the yard from his errand of ministering to the dying shepherd in his hut on the Downs.

Both Ambrosia and Mrs. Dorcas were crying when they came with me to my chamber to say good-night.

“I have laid him a-bed many’s the time when he was a babe, but never was he more helpless,” Dorcas

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said, "than to-night. Aye, strong drink and his wild blood will be his ruin, I always knew it."

"How can you always have known it?" asked Ambrosia, impatiently. "You shake your head when you talk of Nat's wild blood, but 'tis the same as mine."

"Yea, 'tis the same. 'Tis the same as——"

The old housekeeper broke off with a stifled sob, and I knew that she was thinking of Zdenka and her pitiable story.

Ambrosia kissed Dorcas and bade her good-night, and, when she had hobbled away, the girl flung herself down on the floor at my feet and gave way to her grief about Nat.

"Oh, Dove, how we see drunkards come reeling out of the alehouses and taverns and think naught of it, and I have seen sometimes young gallants in Salisbury and Wilton silly with wine, and have laughed at them; but oh, when 'tis one's own brother—one's own, only brother, with whom one hath been bred up and hath held so dear—oh then 'tis most grievous and most horrible!"

She shuddered at the fearful memory of what she had suffered from Nat that night, and so did I.

And then I bethought me of how young Nat was, and how those older than himself had doubtless

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flattered and tempted him, and led him astray. At the reflection my heart softened towards him, and I felt 'twas too early yet to abandon all hope of Nat. Though I had no brothers, I nevertheless had some vague knowledge concerning a mysterious crop called "wild oats," which, 'twas said, the sooner it were sown and reaped the better. But why young men should be expected, and never maids, to sow wild oats at all, I did not understand.

"Ambrosia," said I, "let us pray for him. Let us pray together for him and petition God to turn him from his evil courses and bad companions; so that Master Meredith may have cause to rejoice in him yet, and you and I need not be ashamed of him."

"Do you mean pray out loud?" she asked, lifting her tear-stained face. "I have never done it since I gave up saying my 'Matthew, Mark, Luke and John' to Dorcas, I shouldn't know what words to use withal."

But, when I began to pray out of the fulness of my sore heart, words came flowing easily enough, and Ambrosia echoed them with fervour. 'Twas the first but not the last time she and I prayed together for Nat. In the time that was coming, often and often we sent up our prayers for the erring absent one—prayers that he might be preserved from shipwreck, pestilence and famine, and worse dangers, wherever he wandered

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by sea and land—prayers that he might arise and come home to his father even as the prodigal in the Bible had done. And, at last, our prayers were to be answered, but not till after long, long years of waiting, which maketh the heart sick with the terrible anguish of uncertainty and suspense.

XV

FATHER AND SON

THE next day I nigh feared to meet Nat again after what had happened in the lane the night before. But he came to the breakfast board betimes, as he had not been wont to do of late, and 'twas a relief to hear him chatter and laugh with Ambrosia in somewhat of the old light-hearted fashion which he had so completely disused since his last home-coming from Oxford.

'Twas only when his eyes met mine that they fell, and he looked of a sudden stricken with shame.

To Ambrosia's joy, he did propose a scamper with her and the dogs up to the Downs, and when they came in at dusk, all aglow, with sparkling eyes, and their raven locks waving the more crisply for the damp snow-flakes that had fallen on them, it was as if the old days had come back, and as if no cloud of Nat's making had ever risen 'twixt the brother and sister.

Nat rid not forth that night, and he and Ambrosia played at chess and push-pin by the hearth, hour after

Father and Son

hour, whilst I was busied in the study with copying an antique document for Master Meredith.

I was alone, for Master Meredith had gone to Sarum to sup with the Dean and to discuss some ecclesiastical matter of pressing import. As the dial pointed to nine, I laid down my quill, having finished the copy. I fell to my Hebrew, which I had begun to study at Ivy Church under the Countess's eye, and in which I was anxious to advance for my own delight and to pleasure my lady. I heard Ambrosia yawning in the hall and vowing she was too sleepy to play any more. Then she must have gone to bed, for there was a knock on the study door and Nat came in.

He hung his handsome head as he stood before me, and said humbly—

“I cannot rest ere I crave your pardon, Jeanne. I have little enough expectation that it will be granted, nevertheless I ask it. It all seemeth like a nightmare. I do not recall clearly what happened ; because——”

He paused. I could have helped him out, but I held my peace ; more from shyness than scorn, for now I pitied him.

“Yes,” he went on, “’tis all a confused and hideous jumble in my mind when I try to remember. I know that you chid me well with stinging words that I richly deserved. One thing only I would fain be

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certain about. Did you—did you say you hated me?”

“Yes,” I answered ; and would have added that ’twas not true, and I only hated him when he was not himself through wine, and forgot that he was a gentleman. But ere I could say more, he burst forth bitterly—

“You hate me. You, the gentle, patient Dove ! Then, forsooth, I must be bad, and past redemption ! Had it been otherwise, had you cared, who can say that I might not have turned over a new leaf, and striven to be grave and learned. I should have failed over and over again, but methinks I would have gone on striving anew—ever hoping that one day I might be worthy to touch the hem of your garment. Aye, you are thinking of how much more I touched last night ! Oh, Jeanne, why did fate bring you from out the Grange gates just then ? Why did you cross my path when I was not fit to be within a hundred miles of your pure presence ? You remember how I told you once that, if I couldn’t get my father’s leave to go to sea, I would go without. Well, meseemeth the time hath come to take it into my own hands. ’Tis the only hope for me. If you cared, Jeanne, what became of me, ’twould be different ; but you are too much of an angel to care, too honest to make believe you care what becomes of me.”

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"I do care," said I hotly, "I care for Master Meredith's sake and Ambrosia's."

"But not for mine; I would fain you cared for my sake, I would fain that you loved and not hated me. Yet I know that to ask for your love or even your forgiveness were as vain as to cry for the moon. I say that my father, whom you hold in such high esteem, hath been wrong, fatally wrong where I am concerned. If Philip Massinger had been his son it would have answered well enough, but in trying to force me into a love of bookish and studious ways he hath driven me to the other extreme. And now I have done wickeder things, Jeanne, than drink too much wine, and have landed myself in a worse scrape than ever before. The money I have lost to Master George Brooke 'twixt Christmas and Twelfth Night at dicing is more than I could expect my father to pay, and I shall not ask him."

"Then what will you do?" I exclaimed, in dismay at his confidences; and as I was wondering how far my own small fortune would go towards paying this debt, Nat continued—

"Instead of paying, I have the choice of signing a paper which Master Brooke read over to me, in which I swear to discharge my debt to him by giving my services in a plot which he, his brother Lord Cobham, and some priests, intend to set on foot

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so soon as the breath is out of the Queen's body. 'Tis to prevent the King of Scots coming to the throne. There is a lady who hath a better claim than he. I know not nor care why; I am told to ask no questions, but when the time cometh, to be ready to do the dirty work they may set me, for I shall be their tool. Now I ask you, Jeanne, which is best: to go on like this from bad to worse, to be bound to a set of conspirators who may come to the scaffold, or to wash my hands of it all and take ship for the New World where I may cleanse myself in its untainted airs, and belike pick up gold and treasure enow to pay my debts in an aboveboard way—twenty times over?"

He hung his head no longer, but threw it back with the old proud boyish gesture. His nostrils dilated as if he sniffed the salt breezes of the ocean, and his eyes flashed as if they saw the golden countries beyond it.

"There are temptations everywhere," said I; "whether in Oxon or at the world's end, you will be tempted to sin, Nat. There is only one anchor that can save you from shipwreck, and that is the fear and love of God."

"Thank you for saying that," he said. "I am glad withal that you still hold me not too bad to preach to, for I love your gentle sermons."

Father and Son

"'Tis not my place to preach to you, or to advise you. The only advice I have to give you is to ask your father's leave, to tell him all, to speak to him as openly as you have to me."

And these words had scarce fallen from my lips when Master Meredith's footstep sounded on the tiles without.

He came in smiling, as was his wont, gazing dreamily before him. Though he had been riding quickly through the keen and frosty air, not a vestige of colour had tinged his ivory pallor. As the light from the hanging copper lamp fell on his spare form and his silvered hair, so spiritual was his look that methought he might have been an apparition from another world. A stranger would have found it difficult to credit that the lad, with the sinews and muscles of a Greek athlete, with the fiery restless blood of his mother's Egyptian ancestors coursing beneath his glowing olive skin, could be his son.

"Hath Nat been helping you, Jeanne?" he asked, "or more like you have been giving him aid in some knotty passage in his holiday Greek. There are hard nuts to crack in Lucian, eh, Nat? I have been telling dear Master Dean of your progress and the good report of you from Oriel this last term. He was greatly pleased, and saith he will come with me to Oxon to see you take your degree next year."

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Nat winced, and the crimson deepened in his cheek. He looked despairingly at me, and my eyes must have spoken the word which was on my lips "courage," for Nat made an effort to be courageous in that moral sense which is so much harder to some than the physical.

"Father, 'tis a mistake," said he. "I have made no real progress. The improvement of which you speak did not last long. A step forward counts for nothing when it is followed by a slip backwards measuring yards. I have been idle as ever, and scarce looked into a book for months. I have spent my time in gaming, cock-fighting and cards. I shall never take a degree even if I tarry at Oxon till doomsday."

The smile faded from Master Meredith's face, and its lines hardened into obstinacy. But his hand trembled, as it toyed with the silken book-marker of my Hebrew Lexicon which he had taken up absently.

"Indeed," he said coldly. "And you have the effrontery to tell me this!"

"Surely 'tis better for him to speak. 'Tis not effrontery to be honest," cried I, plunging suddenly into the lists for Nat; "'twas I advised him to tell you all, and not to put off till, till——"

"Till the next time I have to hear an ill report of

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my son from others," Master Meredith interrupted me, "to learn that he hath taken to wild courses again, and shown himself unmindful of all my earnest wishes with regard to his future. 'Tis true this blunt confession hath spared me the blow, for I had not suspected that aught was wrong again, or that he had added deception to his other grievous faults."

"But now he would fain deceive no longer," I murmured.

"Yes, sir," Nat broke forth passionately. "I will speak out once and for ever. I should never have gone to Oxon to cost you money and sorrow. 'Twas fear of your displeasure and disappointment which kept me silent, when you decided to take me thither. 'Twould have been less craven to have made a clean breast of it then. How much wrong and misunderstanding it might have saved, you know, sir. It could not go on, and this is the end. Ships are sailing out every day from Weymouth and other English ports; I can take my luck on one of them. Prythee, father, let me go with your consent and blessing."

"I shall give neither," Master Meredith said decidedly, his anger rising; indeed, 'twas the first time I had seen him so moved out of his habitual calmness. "Were I to do so, I should incur the wrath of Him to whom I am answerable for the sacred trust of your soul. If you go, you set my parental authority

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at naught and disobey me, your earthly father, who hath sought in prayer the counsel of the Heavenly Father of us all, that I might be guided by Him to act wisely for your welfare. Thou hast gone astray from the straight path, even as near me as at Oxford. What would it be shouldst thou go beyond my sight altogether, where my restraining hand could not reach thee? I dread to think! Dost remember Master Ascham's words, 'An Englishman Italianated is a Devil incarnate'?"

"Italy, sir!" Nat exclaimed. "You know 'tis not in Italy or anywhere in Europe that I pine and sicken to try my wings. 'Tis further off than that, in the boundless new countries on t'other side of the ocean, where there is room for action, room for those who would exercise their limbs and use their hands as well as their heads, room too for good and bad scapegraces and heroes."

"A field in many an instance for lawless living, fighting, plundering, and godlessness."

"What of Captains Drake and Hawkins and their followers? And did not he, too, who hath been held up to me as an example ever since I can remember, Sir Philip Sidney, long to undertake an enterprisc in this same New World; and would he not have done so had he gotten his desire, sir!"

"Would that you had emulated his example in all

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things," said Master Meredith. "'Tis well methinks that 'twas not to you Sir Philip stood godfather, when he tarried at Wilton with his sister, but to one who hath proved himself more worthy to bear his revered name, the son of my friend Arthur Massinger."

"Aye, 'tis a pity, in sooth, that Philip Massinger is not your son, sir," Nat said, in a voice so sad and bitter, that all vexation and anger seemed to die in Master Meredith at the sound of it, and he spoke again with his wonted gentleness, as he said—

"My boy, go to bed and forget this. On the morrow, ere you go back to Oxon, we will talk over together the new trouble you have gotten into and see what can be done. 'Tis never too late to mend. You shall start afresh, Nat, with a clean slate."

"No, father; that can never be, at least, not this side of the ocean."

And he turned and left the study, but not before casting another glance at me, as if he would say, "You see it hath been of no avail."

When he was gone, I fell to pleading most earnestly with the father on the son's behalf. I found myself, in my eagerness, dropping on my knees beside his chair and clasping my hands on his knee.

"Prythee call him back," I urged. "Give him

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the consent and blessing he asked, lest he go without."

Methought if only my lady the Countess had been there she too would have seen the matter as I saw it, and would, in her great wisdom, have used arguments a hundred times more likely than mine to convince Master Meredith.

But I tried my utmost, for I saw full well that matters 'twixt Nat and his father had come to a crisis that night, and there was no time to await the intercession of the Countess. So I besought Master Meredith to let his son, even now at the eleventh hour, take the path in life which he would fain have chosen for himself at the outset, and to wish him God-speed. Perchance it would be the saving of Nat from ruin, I said, and the saving of Master Meredith himself from years of sorrow, aye belike of self-reproach. And so I spoke forth thus boldly. My guardian gazed wearily at the dying embers on the hearth, and scarce seemed to heed or so much as hear my words. But when I had finished he turned the dear grey eyes, which were guileless as a child's, from the fire and fixed them on me.

"Child," he said slowly, "I know what is best for my son. You must leave him to me."

It was tenderly spoken; but a rebuke withal, and I felt that I could say no more. I rose from my

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knees and bid him good-night ; but ere I turned to go, he got up from his chair, and bending his silver head over me, kissed me on the forehead. It was the first caress I had ever had from Master Meredith, and albeit he stood in the position of a father to me, and was indeed more than old enough to be my father, I went from the study blushing.

That night as I read in Thomas à Kempis' *De Imitatione Christi* in my chamber, certain passages struck me as very applicable to Nat. I took a pencil and underlined—

“Thou art miserable wherever thou art and which way soever thou turnest thyself, unless thou turn thyself to God.

“Why art thou troubled because things do not succeed with thee according to thy wish and desire?

“Who is there that has all things according to his wish?

“Neither I, nor thou, nor any man upon earth.”

And—

“If thou seekest this or that and wouldst be here or there, for thine own advantage and thine own good pleasure, thou wilt never be at rest or free from anxiety, for in everything thou wilt find some defect, and in every place there will be some one who will cross thee.”

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Methought that on the morrow I would find an opportunity to slip my slender copy, printed by Aldus, of this pregnant and beloved work of exhortation into Nat's bed-chamber, open at the first page that I had marked. Alack! the opportunity came sooner than I thought for, and then there was no motive for what I had intended to do, Nat having left his chamber void in the night without ruffling his bed, Dorcas said. She it was who raised the alarm when morning came.

"He hath not taken the baggage with him he would have carried to Oxon," she told her master, "but enough clothes and possessions to make a bundle."

Master Meredith, despite the warning he had had, believed Nat would be back at noon to meet Philip Massinger at the cross-roads to accompany him to Oxford. But noon and afternoon came, and dusk and nightfall, and no Nat, and no news of him.

With some of the materials for his opus before him at the study table, Master Meredith prepared to spend the long cold night in writing. But he spent it in watching and praying and writ not a line, and without at the study door Ambrosia and I crouched in our night-smocks, weeping and listening strainedly to the strange deep silence of the country on a winter's night.

Not a dog barked, not a step crunched the frozen

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snow. But when through the stillness the clocks from the belfries of Wilton sounded the midnight hour, there came back to me the ringing of the carillon at Antwerp, and I seemed to see again the tall pointed roofs of the Flemish houses huddled together in the purple dawn as they had looked when my dying father asked for the curtain to be drawn back from the window that he might see the light. I know not what made me think of it then any more than I know how 'tis that at certain times and in certain places, without any apparent connection therewith, pictures of the past flash so swiftly and vividly into the present. Maybe they are always there, the pictures, painted on the walls of our mind, and at such times as we turn our eyes contemplatively within they stare at us out of the shadows. When another white, chill morning broke, Master Meredith awoke to the reality that Nat would not come back and that he would hear naught by the post of his arrival at Oxon. So he went forth with Luke to trace his runaway son, as once he had gone to search for his fair wife. This time the quest was longer, but equally vain withal, for after several days' absence the Rector and the old serving-man came back to Burcombe. They had been to Weymouth and Southampton and had found out nothing about Nat having taken ship at either of those ports. And then they had gone to London—the great, busy, bustling

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London, where rich and poor, virtue and vice, beauty and ugliness converge as in a seething cauldron.

There naught but hopelessness had met them, for as old Luke sagely remarked to Mrs. Dorcas, "'Twere as much sense to look for a needle in a pottle of hay as for the young master in London town."

And well we all knew that Nat would not tarry long in London, but by this time belike would be speeding far away on the breast of the ocean. Now that he had taken his own way and gotten his heart's desire, methought it might already have turned to ashes in his grasp, and the golden visions faded from the horizon as he sailed towards it.

'Twas with almost a feeling of guilt that I reflected how much more I was in Nat's confidence than were his father and sister, and I would fain have known nothing of that debt to Master George Brooke that he had told me of, and of the manner in which it had been proposed he should discharge it, for the thought of it much troubled me.

One day Master Meredith gathered the little household together, and said in a voice that quivered with restrained emotion—

"My son Nathaniel Meredith hath disobeyed me and chosen to take a course in direct opposition to my wishes and commands ; it will please me better, therefore, if none questioneth me about him or maketh

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mention of his name within my hearing for the future."

Thus Master Meredith elected never to speak to those around him of the son who had so sorely disappointed him, just as he had never spoken these many years of his dead wife, though he kept her chamber swept and garnished as a sanctuary and perfumed with his garden's sweetest flowers and herbs.

XVI

LA REINE EST MORTE, VIVE LE ROI

ALL over the world, at every minute of the twenty-four hours people pay the debt of nature and die. Yet when 'tis a sovereign and ruler of a great empire who passes away, how wondrous and untold are the changes wrought by the event.

Though born and bred abroad, I had been taught and liked well to regard myself as a subject of Elizabeth the Virgin Queen of England, and I was always glad that I had chanced to set eyes on her august Majesty when I had first arrived in my father's native country.

Every day afterwards at Burcombe I had awakened to the thought that I lived in a glorious reign within the realm of a Queen who was wise despite her follies, and with all her faults most well beloved; every day, till that March morning when the bells of Sarum tolled, and 'twas known throughout the length and breadth of the land that the long-fought combat with decay and dissolution was over, and the spirit of England's Elizabeth had passed into the

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silence where no distinction existeth betwixt ruler and ruled, potentate and peasant.

Even then I could scarce realize that now, instead of "God save the Queen" one must say "God save the King"—the King of whom so little was known, whom some called an alien because he had been born in Scotland, and whom his dying kinswoman had been so loth to name as her successor, though no other claimant suggested to her pleased her better.

In troth the Queen's suspicion and fear of one, the Lady Arabella Stuart, had so increased towards the end of her life, that she had been held in durance at a house in Yorkshire and deprived of her allowance of £800 a year. She being of Royal blood should have walked as chief mourner at the obsequies of the Queen, but she refused, saying, "Sith her access to Her Majesty in her lifetime might not be permitted, she would not after her death be brought so near her, as on a stage for public spectacle."

Thus this fair lady renounced the first opportunity of putting herself forward as an heiress to the Crown. My Lady Pembroke said that she had no desire to wear it or any crown, having refused the offer of a foreign monarch as well as that of a crowd of other distinguished aspirants for her hand.

"This beautiful creature," spoke my lady, "desireth no crown but the crown of happiness, no husband but



SALISBURY CATHEDRAL FROM THE RIVER.

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the husband of her choice. The saw 'Happy as a king' she holdeth delusive. Kings and queens can never be happy, saith she."

The Countess in these days oftentimes alluded to the Lady Arabella in her converse, she remembering her first as the little girl who had sat at the Queen's right hand at a certain banquet at Whitehall, and then as the high-spirited *protégée* of her grandmother, the Dowager Countess of Shrewsbury, stern old Bess of Hardwick, from whose surveillance she had escaped on a visit to a milder relative when we had happed upon her that autumn evening by the road-side near Fugglestone, and had not known who she was. Ambrosia had never forgot that encounter, and talked still of the golden-haired horsewoman, for whose smile she had vowed she would have gone to the world's end if she had been a man.

And almost ere the King had crossed the border many besides Ambrosia talked of the Lady Arabella. He had not advanced far into his new kingdom when she sent him word of a treasonable converse of which she was the subject, which she had overheard at a hostel; so anxious was she to repudiate all rights that the zeal of others would set up for her and to stand well with her Stuart cousin.

King James had ordered to be arrested and hung without trial at Newark a man who had tried to in-

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tercept the Lady Arabella's communication, and thus had begun his reign with an act of tyranny which disgusted those of his subjects who would fain be governed constitutionally, and made them tremble for the future. It served only as an impetus to the main conspiracy against him, that conspiracy also to be nipped in the bud, of which I had heard hints long ago from Nat when it was yet in the clouds, and of which more hereafter.

Meanwhile the King determined to recognize no dangerous rival in the person of his beautiful kinswoman. On her progress from the North the Queen, with Prince Henry and the Princess Elizabeth, had taken Welbeck on her way, the seat of the Cavendishes, where my Lady Arabella then tarried. She had charmed the pleasure-loving Queen Anne by devising a pastoral masque to welcome her. Herself arrayed as Diana, attended by her nymphs, preceded by all the young people of rank in the neighbourhood dressed as shepherds and shepherdesses and wreathed with garlands, and huntsmen leading a herd of tame deer, she went forth in the spring morning to meet the Royal party. The young Princess Elizabeth had clapped her hands in great delight at the pretty pageant prepared by the lady who was to be appointed her state governess not long afterwards.

I have made mention of the great and far-reaching

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change caused by the death of a sovereign, but I did not comment on what is equally remarkable, and that is how soon men grow accustomed to such a change. How quickly a nation recovers from the shock of an emotion which hath shaken it to its foundation, and goes on its way under a new *régime* forgetful of the dead. Aye, the great dead, even as the little, are near forgot by the multitude so soon as the tomb closes over their ashes. And truly saith a poet living at this present hour in which I write of the past,—

“Only the actions of the just
Smell sweet, and blossom in their dust.”

Methought the news of jubilation and junketings at the advent of King James followed all too closely on the heels of the tragical tale of the old Queen's slow and painful descent to the grave.

We at Burcombe Rectory had heard details of each stage of that descent, for the most part from the lips of the Countess, whose sons being about the Court, reported them to her in their letters writ out of London.

In tones of reverential pity and sorrow my lady had told of how the dying Queen, whom she and hers had served with such inextinguishable loyalty, would not for long be persuaded to take to her bed, but sat on the floor of the Presence Chamber, propped by cushions, stubbornly declining all spiritual solace and

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medicinal comfort: of how she crouched brooding there, haunted by horrid fancies and visions, once plunging her dagger through the arras at an imaginary foe, and another time beholding the phantom of her own wasted form pass before her glazing eyes.

It seemed all the terrors and pathos of a Queen departing this life thus were yet fresh and alive in my mind, when it was announced one day in August that the King and Queen were coming to Wilton House, and my lord the Earl was making preparations to receive them there with all due honour and state.

My lady bestirred herself in every way to assist her son in his entertaining of the Royal party. 'Twas she who bid Master Ben Jonson come down from London in company with the architect, Master Inigo Jones, to arrange his Masque of Gipsies in the grounds. This was how the author of *Every Man in his Humour* first commended himself to the notice of Queen Anne of Denmark, whose appetite for shows and pageants was even greater than Queen Elizabeth's, and her taste therein nicer. 'Twas the beginning of a long series of masques writ by the learned poet for Her Majesty's amusement, to be performed at Whitehall, Theobalds, Hampton Court, and divers other palaces and country seats. In being able to gratify this passion of the Queen's, Master Jonson grew richer than he had been, albeit my Lord Pembroke continued to send him every New Year's Day £20

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wherewith to purchase him books. Before the King's arrival, I recall the morning, when coming for my Hebrew reading to the Countess's cabinet off the picture gallery, I found seated there Master Jonson, Master Gabriel Harvey, and Master John Davis, who had eulogized the Countess in his *Wit's Pilgrimage*, his *Scourge of Folly*, and *Muses' Sacrifice*. Master Jonson was then yet in his youthful days, but looked near as old as Master Harvey, who had long passed his. Poverty and the strenuous labours of his loveless boyhood, when he had worked as a mason, holding a trowel in one hand and a Horace in the other, had left their mark on his rugged face. 'Twas disfigured with scars, and deeply pitted from the small-pox. He had a short, ungainly figure of great bulk, and rough hands, with stumpy, broad fingers. The oceans of Canary sack which, with great Will Shakespeare and others his fellow-poets, he drank over his famous "wit combats" at the Mermaid Tavern in London, might belike be answerable for his eyes being bloodshot and watering plentifully whensoever he laughed. But despite this unattractive exterior, there was a charm about Master Jonson directly he opened his lips. His voice was deep without being gruff, his sentences so exquisitely rounded and plentifully spiced with quotations from the Greeks and Latins, that to me it was a joy to

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harken to him. Master Harvey was crabbed and sour, and seemed to try to trip up Master Jonson in his converse, and when he saw 'twas no use, resigned himself to muttering contradictions under his breath, twitching and sniffing the while in a very unpleasant fashion.

This gentleman, methought, should have been well pleased at his *Areopagus* of long ago surviving in the name the gracious Countess had given that apartment in Wilton House where her literary pensioners pursued their studies. Times were changed since the pedantic Gabriel Harvey had been somewhat of a power in English literature, and had dictated his theory about the superiority of hexameters and sapphics over the native rhythms, to the illustrious brotherhood of the Areopagus, of which Edmund Spenser and Philip Sidney were members. The curious experiments in divers classic metres in the lyrics scattered up and down the *Arcadia* were due to his influence, though even the Countess allowed they were not always the happiest recommendation to artificial versifying.

The fashion had passed, and Master Harvey had sithence found scope for his critical faculty in engaging in violent and scurrilous controversy with the dramatists, Masters Green and Nashe, in which he had in no wise been victorious, albeit he returned over and over again to the charge, "The

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Trimming," as he called it, "of Thomas Nashe."

Twas not unlikely that Master Ben Jonson felt some secret resentment towards the assailant of his brothers of the craft, and he on his side would regard Master Jonson, who had been but a lad of thirteen when Sir Philip Sidney died, as one of that new generation toward which he cherished so much antagonistic feeling. In sooth, so unsympathetic were these two to each other that they might well have come to loggerheads that morning, had not their hostess so sweetly held the balance betwixt them, casting the oil of her soothing speech upon the troubled waters when the conversation threatened to become heated, and drawing Master Davis into it and even me at a storm-signal.

She at length turned the talk from personal topics to that of books, and made a move from the cabinet to the library to show the gentlemen Dame Juliana Berners' Book of Hunting, Hawking and Heraldry in English verse, printed so early as the third Richard's reign.

I would have stayed behind and conned my Hebrew, but my lady beckoned me to follow, and I came along the gallery and down the double marble staircase beside Master Gabriel Harvey. Methought he conversed in a style very much resembling the old school-master Holofernes, of Master Shakespeare's *Love's*

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Labour's Lost. Yet withal I could not but be interested in his company, remembering how the poet of poets, Edmund Spenser, had held him for a profound critic and sworn himself his devoted friend for life when they first had met at Cambridge. And though Master Gabriel had picked holes in the early cantos of the *Faerie Queen*, when its author sent them to him in manuscript, and coldly discouraged the continuance of the great work, the friendship twixt poet and critic had survived, and only ended with Spenser's direful death in a lodging in Westminster. 'Twas half in my mind to ask Master Harvey if his opinion of the *Faerie Queen* had in any wise altered during these years in which it had been published and attained immortal fame, but I refrained from fear he might take the question amiss and display his crotchety temper. Instead I laid before him on a desk the manuscript of Sir Philip's and my lady's complete translation of the Psalms bound in crimson velvet and gilt, and curiously writ, for his inspection. He said that he had seen it ere I was born; then he turned to "The Lord is My Shepherd," and made a passage in that exquisite pearl of a religious poem serve him as a text for a long, dry and pedantic lecture on derivations and metres. I strove to follow him with due respect with one ear, whilst the other would strain to hear what Master Ben Jonson and my lady were

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discoursing over Dame Juliana Berners and an ancient Latin poem writ in Julius Cæsar's time

But it mattered little whether I lent old Master Harvey one ear or two ; he droned on even when I gave up the feint of listening at all, which I could not help doing when I saw that Master Jonson had stepped into the deep recess of the bay, and was looking forth on the terrace at something that appeared to interest him more than all the books in the famous library of Wilton.

"My lady," he exclaimed, "I see there leaning on yonder balustrade a fair maid, who impersonates to the life the leading lady of my masque. Excuse me when I say that none of the ladies proposed for the part will fit it as well as this one. For in sooth, my lady, she *is* it without make-up. She is the Queen of the Gipsies."

"'Tis my god-daughter, Ambrosia Meredith," said the Countess. "Jeanne, she hath come to fetch thee from thy Hebrew, which proveth 'tis waxing late and we have not begun. Methinks, child, our readings will have to be deferred now till after their Majesties have come and gone."

The Countess thus addressing me, I made bold to leave Master Harvey and come into the window likewise to see what so excited Master Ben Jonson's admiration. Of course I knew 'twas Ambrosia's

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beauty, familiar indeed to me by this time, when I had so long been her companion, playfellow, bed-fellow, aye, and consoler too, since Nat had gone and never been heard of again. Nevertheless 'twas always full of fresh surprises. Methought I could not be absent from her for an hour without seeing her afterwards with a new shock of delight and wonder.

And so it was now, as I looked from the great window of the library, curious to see her as Master Jonson beheld her. The hot sun of an August noon blazed on the terrace, but she had sought no shade. Bareheaded and barefooted she half sat, half leaned on the rail, the deep blue of the sky above her, behind her crimson roses climbing up from the pleasance below, the gleaming river, and the shimmering sylvan glades of the park. The peacocks flaunted their jewelled tails and strutted about at her feet. She laughed as she tossed them sweet biscuits, and showed for a moment the flash of white teeth locked behind those firm-set red lips. She was in a brown kirtle and white over-dress of patterned dimity, with scarlet riband knots, and a chain of coral was about her neck. The dense blackness of her curling hair seemed to have a blue gloss on it in the sunlight, and her colour was more brilliant, methought, than any flower's or butterfly's in the pleasance. Who could look on a white waxen face, howsoever black the hair and eyes,

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thought I, after hers, and find pleasure in it? Tears dimmed my eyes at the perfect picture Ambrosia made on the terrace, tears of pride, but belike mingled with something of awe and sadness at the thought of what a snare such beauty as hers can prove to men. Then Master Jonson spoke once more in his sonorous voice—

“Madame, why was this brightest jewel of your household concealed yester-eve when we were choosing *rôles* for the ladies in the rehearsing of our masque?”

“Mistress Meredith is not of my household,” the Countess replied. “Her home is close at hand in Burcombe Rectory, for her father is the modest scholar and humble divine who fills that cure.”

“My Gipsy Queen a country parson’s daughter! Odd’s life, who would have thought it? See how she turns her face to the sun, such dark fairness hath no more fear of Phœbus’ searching darts than the sunflower itself. ’Tis not too late, my lady, to allot the part in the masque to this most suitable and beautiful maiden; and I beseech you to do it, if you would have it a complete success and disarm all criticism. Methinks I can see her with the castanets held in those brown hands (she will need no walnut stain), showing the shapely arm, and those pretty feet tripping the sarabande on the sward. She must

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enchant our Royal pair, and give to my masque an *élan* I never dreamed."

Master Ben Jonson waxed more and more eager, but the Countess somewhat checked his enthusiasm by saying that she could not decide instantly whether Ambrosia should appear in the masque or not, as her father, Master Meredith, would have to be consulted thereon, and the decision would rest with him.

Even as she said this, a gallant figure in richest satin, slashed and embroidered with lace, appeared upon the pleasance below the terrace, and looked up at Ambrosia through the roses. 'Twas my Lord Pembroke, who I had thought would have been too occupied in superintending with his steward, Master Arthur Massinger, preparations for the Royal visitors, to saunter leisurely on the pleasance smoking his tobacco pipe. But I was wrong, and it seemed that my lord was not pressed for time, for he very deliberately plucked a rose, and raising himself by the balustrade did stick it deftly in Ambrosia's hair. His lips moved and the dark depths of his blue eyes spoke their usual eloquent language. Doubtless he compared the red of Ambrosia's cheek with 'the rose, to the rose's disfavour. At some word of his Ambrosia sprang up and quickly descended the steps twixt two plump marble cupids leading to the

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pleasance. In another minute she and my lord were walking in each other's company, not towards the house, but away from it in the direction of Sir Philip's Avenue on the high slopes of the park. Clearly Ambrosia had forgot that she had come to walk home with me after my Hebrew lesson was over.

"They make a pair," said Master Jonson, gazing after them musingly; "outwardly well matched, both tall, both abounding with the grace and comeliness of beautiful youth."

There was no response, and looking round I beheld a cloud of displeasure and vexation on the fair face of my lady, Pembroke's mother.

XVII

THE CONSPIRATOR IN THE LANE

THE Countess excused herself from her guests in the library and returned with me to her cabinet, whither I went to fetch my scarf and Hebrew books before going home.

She was very grave, and I knew what we had seen pass on the terrace from the window still troubled her.

"Listen, little Jeanne," said she, taking the fringed end of my scarf, as I put it on, 'twixt her long fingers. "'Tis time Ambrosia were told that my son hath at last seen fit to act on that advice of his friend Master Shakespeare so poetically and passionately urged by him in the sonnets he hath writ to Will. He will take a wife, and she for whom we have negotiated successfully with my Lord of Shrewsbury cometh hither with the Court. Whilst the King's Majesty tarries here at Wilton their formal betrothal is like to take place."

"And you would have me tell Ambrosia, Madame?" said I. "Methinks if the news is of such importance to her 'twere well that my lord the Earl should impart it to her himself."

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I regretted my outspokenness when I saw that the Countess's distress increased at what I said.

"Mefeareth that he would have to impart it to many if *he* regarded the matter as of great import," she said. "Alack, child, 'tis in this my son differeth from his uncle. Thou knowest how in his love of letters and of beautiful things he doth follow in Philip's shining footsteps. Often have I thought to see Philip again in some word and gesture of Will's, but in this truly he resembleth him not—this trifling with women, this light handling of their hearts as playthings for a sunny hour, when to them it may mean a lifelong pain."

So there was the possibility of others besides Ambrosia breaking their hearts at the Earl of Pembroke taking unto himself a wife. Nevertheless Ambrosia's heart-break seemed to me for all that none the less intolerable.

But maybe to comfort my lady and partly because I believed it might be so, I said—

"Ambrosia cannot be surprised at hearing that my lord proposes to wed. She must long have known that he would seek a bride amongst his peers in birth and fortune. Belike she will take the news calmly."

"Aye, calmly ; but if she loveth Will and he hath encouraged her to love him, then, oh then, 'tis a pitiful thing, and I feel as if in some way I should have

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prevented it, by the exercise of more vigilance over my god-child."

"Oh, dear lady, how could you prevent it? Love cometh and taketh possession wheresoever it listeth. No vigilance, nay, no bars and locks, avail to keep it out."

"Small wiseacre that thou art," the Countess said with a smile. "One would think thou speakest from experience."

When I parted from my lady, I took my way home by the bridge over the Nadder, and climbed the slopes of the park, instead of going out by the gates into the road.

As I went I saw Lord Pembroke in the distance issue forth from Sir Philip's Avenue, and join some of the gentlemen of his household, and a falconer with whom they had been a-hawking. I guessed that I should find Ambrosia lingering alone beneath the shade of the beeches. Now methought I must do what I had been charged by the Countess, and tell Ambrosia of my lord's betrothal, but coming upon her seated on the stump of a tree, with her head bent dejectedly and her hands clasping her knees, I saw that I had been spared the painful task.

Ambrosia knew, and my lord had told her.

Just where she sat the sunlight pierced the green duskiness of the full foliage above her, and danced on

The Conspirator in the Lane

the face she turned towards me. 'Twas no longer the face of a child, but that of a woman who has suffered.

"Jeanne," said she, "dost know that amongst the ladies of the Court who come hither to-morrow with the Queen's Majesty, cometh one who is to be the future Countess of Pembroke?"

"Yes," said I, "I have heard it."

She stood up and held out her hands as if she were pushing something from her.

"'Tis the end of love for me, Jeanne, at least the love of men; I must forget—forget, for 'twill be sinful to remember. He hath told me 'twas wrong; wrong to ask me to come secretly beneath these trees, where he first said I was like unto a wood-nymph; wrong to whisper soft sweet words in my ear; wrong to crown me with flowers, and to . . . Aye, but why do I repeat what he said, for you to say he hath been cruel? You must not say it, Jeanne, you shall not! Never will I brook to hear him ill spoken of. He is for me unalterably a god among men. Do you understand? I would liefer have been cruelly used by him than well used by any other man. Howsoever wrong and wicked it may have been, I would not that it had been otherwise."

She took the rose out of her hair, and looked sadly into its ruby heart.

"I will ever cherish the memory . . . Nay, I must

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forget, he told me it must be forgot . . . Easy for him, belike, but for me . . . Why did he give me this when he knew in a few minutes he was to sound the death-knell of my hopes ?”

She threw the rose down. There it lay, to waste its red sweetness and wither on the mossy floor of the avenue.

“You are so young, darling, and so very fair,” I said as we walked onwards ; “many a brave good man will woo you yet.”

“They will woo in vain,” she said. “I told you that I had done with it for ever, the love of men ! But that does not mean I shall mope and pine and fade away, as love-sick wenches do. Not I ! I will still laugh and sing and enjoy the beautiful world. There are always birds and flowers, the trees, the sky, and the wind ; if my heart is dead and numb within, no one shall suspect it. I won’t wear it on my sleeve for daws to peck at. When Nat comes home, he will find me the same, ever ready to fly up to the Downs with him on a summer morn, to hunt moths in the woods by moonlight, to ride Farmer Penfold’s foals barebacked, to jump hurdles and climb fences, and play at base. But what folly I talk ! When Nat comes home, if ever he doth, he will belike care no more for most of these things. He will be a boy no longer. Oh Nat ! Nat !”

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'Twas almost a cry with which she spoke her brother's name, as we came over a stile into the dazzling white, sun-scorched road. It caught the ear of a passing horseman, who drew rein and looked searchingly at us. His comely person was gallantly and youthfully clad. But there were silver threads in his lovelocks, and his countenance was so marked by records of dissipation that one saw at a glance loose-living had prematurely aged him. With a scoffing eye and lip he said—

“Hath luck thrown thee in my path again just in the nick of time, Master Nathaniel? Methought 'twas a bare enough chance that I might light on thee in these lanes round about thy home. Thou art the very emissary we need to bear a letter of exceeding importance to a certain fair lady who 'tis well known misliketh not the sight of a pretty boy. But why hast thou come home from sea to masquerade in wench's clothing? 'Tis not adapted for our purpose, though, by Gad! it becometh thee mightily, or is it that thy beauty becometh equally the masculine and feminine genders?”

“You talk in riddles, sir,” said Ambrosia. “My brother 'tis supposed is still overseas, but, alack! he hath let naught be heard of him since he went. I am his sister, Ambrosia Meredith.”

“Sister! I never knew he had a sister. Aye, we

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don't chatter about our sisters at cards, even when they are flaming black beauties." He bent far over his horse's side and ogled Ambrosia as he said this. "'Tis not often a brother and sister, even twins, pair so exactly in perfection of form and face save in the play-books."

Ambrosia's disgust at the gentleman's light familiarity of address was half conquered by a desire to learn what he knew of her brother and how he had been connected with him. So that when I made a motion to walk on she did not follow it, but still stood looking up at the stranger proudly but inquiringly.

Suddenly a thought seemed to strike him. He slid from the saddle, and throwing the reins over his arm, drew nearer to Ambrosia. He lowered his voice confidentially as he said—

"Methinks we might engage you in the same mission as we purposed to engage your brother. Only instead of Nathaniel Meredith posing as a wench, as I took you for, you must be Ambrosia Meredith posing as Nathaniel for this occasion; because, the mission concerning a lady, 'tis a comely lad we require to help us rather than a comely maid. How would you like to be in some measure instrumental, my pretty one, in putting a lovely and charming Queen on the throne of England instead of a Scottish boor, whose extravagant notions of

The Conspirator in the Lane

his own Divine Kingship may work his nation's ruin?"

There was no doubt in my mind now that this gentleman was that Master George Brooke, brother to the Lord Cobham, of whose dark schemes Nat had spoken to me that night of his penitence near two years ago.

Methought he must have been drinking hard at taverns by the road to so forget himself as to talk treason to an unknown maiden in the lane.

Now I pulled Ambrosia by the sleeve.

"Come," I said, "do not tarry here in converse with a conspirator. It may prove dangerous."

He started, gave me a sharp glance, and then got to horse again.

"That a little timid-looking Puritan person in grey should so boldly discern the situation is more than I reckoned for," said he. "Farewell, then, my dark beauty; belike we may meet hercabouts once more, and you will be alone." He laughed, put spurs into his horse and galloped away through a veil of dust.

Ambrosia and I pursued our way to the Rectory, both feeling the morning had been more eventful than either of us had thought for when I set out for my Hebrew lesson.

XVIII

THE MASQUE OF GIPSIES

MUCH happened during the King's summer visit to Wilton House. When he came thither with his Queen and his slim young son and heir, Prince Henry, His Majesty had seen little of his new capital.

The plague was raging there, and the festivities of the Coronation at Westminster had been curtailed in consequence. King James was glad to shake the dust of the plague-stricken city from off his feet, and to hasten away and divert himself with hunting and hawking at one or other of the fair country-seats set at his disposal by English noblemen.

He brought to Wilton a huge and resplendent retinue, which even my Lord Pembroke's spacious house could not altogether accommodate, and it overflowed into Fugglestone, Netherhampton, and our dear Grange of Burcombe, the sweet peacefulness of which was greatly disturbed by the presence of noisy, flaunting hangers-on of the Court.

If I remember aright 'twas the morning after

The Masque of Gipsies

his arrival that I was with Master Meredith in the little garden, where he gazed in rapture on his tall, creamy, and rose-red hollyhocks, when we heard the huntsman's horn and saw His Majesty a-horseback, and the hounds uncoupled in hot pursuit of a stag. He took the hedge into the meadows just below the Rectory gate, and we had a good view of his lumpy, high-shouldered figure and clumsy horsemanship. After that 'twas no uncommon sight to see his sacred Majesty a-riding his sweating steed full tilt on the road or spurring it up to the steep Downs. Sometimes his oaths and his Latin quotations floated on the air, and both made Master Meredith shudder, for the King, albeit a sound scholar, pronounced the dead tongues with a broad Scotch accent which nigh lacerated a sensitive ear.

I cannot say that I was any more favourably struck by the King's appearance when I beheld him seated with the Queen and Prince, Archie, his Fool, and all his lords and ladies in great magnificence, watching Master Ben Jonson's masque in the park. 'Twas my fortune to be quite near their Majesties, because the Countess had graciously invited me to sit with her and the ladies of her household to witness the fair spectacle. From this coign of vantage I could see that the King had even less neck than he appeared to have on horseback, that his eyes were crafty and

The Masque of Gipsies

colourless, his hair coarse and rough, his lips loose, and his whole bearing not rendered a whit more kingly and less clownish by the extreme richness of his dress, which was most extraordinarily quilted and padded.

Queen Anne, though thick-featured, had a pure, pale skin, and a look of elegance withal, beside the King her husband. She was apparelled in bright colours, and in the most exaggerated of French fashions, with a wide farthingale and outspread collar, instead of the tight ruff so beloved of the late Queen ; and her hat was tall-crowned, shaped like a sugar-loaf, with scarce any brim for its bunch of plumes to rest on. She had a passionate fondness for play-acting, pageantry and masques, and was never so happy as when taking part in the latter herself. It was somewhat of a wonder that she and her ladies did not put themselves at the head of the revels on this occasion, but they refrained, and Her Majesty seemed well content to keep to her state chair, beneath the summer sky and the spreading branches of the beeches, and watch the entertainment provided for her amusement.

And what a wondrous scene of beauty it was ! Despite the presence of Master Inigo Jones there were no wings of painted canvas, no artificial pillars or stage ; naught but the scenery Nature had provided in darkling woodland slopes and emerald

The Masque of Gipsies

sward. 'Twas called a masque of gipsies, but there were morris-dancers, dryads, satyrs and fauns, mixed up with the swarthy mimic nomads who sang gipsy choruses and danced gipsy dances. Of these with their false jetty locks and walnut-stained skins, Ambrosia—for Master Jonson had gotten his way—was the Queen. Without a touch of paint, and with her own black hair flying in glorious waves about her shoulders, Ambrosia stirred the cauldron, played and danced with the gipsy children, told fortunes, and was wed over the tongs; and in every movement, even to the shaking of the long, heavy, wrought-gold earrings that hung from her small ears, there was an infinite charm, a wild, unstudied grace which, in sooth, was no acting, for 'twas born in her. Was she not Zdenka's daughter? And methought had Nat, Zdenka's son, been there, too, to impersonate the gipsy bridegroom of the masque, instead of Master Philip Herbert, the illusion would have been even more perfect still.

However, the Queen could not have been more enchanted than she was with the performance, and, after it was over, the mock Queen of the Gipsies was presented to the real Queen Consort of England, and received from her plump white hand the guerdon of a pearl and topaz heart.

'Twas well Master Meredith, I said to myself, had

The Masque of Gipsies

not been persuaded to come down to Wilton to witness the masque of gipsies ; 'twould assuredly have brought back too vividly and painfully to him the past, and the story of his wife and her most hapless fate.

And as sitting amidst that brilliant audience I watched the beautiful scene, and the fleeting lights and shadows of the August afternoon came and went on the grass, and the zephyrs breathed softly through the trees, rustling the leaves and stirring here and there a riband or a lovelock, I could not help thinking of how I had seen dear Master Meredith last, ere I had started for Wilton House. 'Twas holding the horny palm of a poor parishioner in his, listening to a tale of woe that she poured forth of how the King's favourite hound, Jowler, who accompanied his royal master on all his progresses, had upset her little cart as she was going to Sarum Market, and scattered and destroyed all her stock of eggs and butter. How earnestly Master Meredith had listened to her, with what complete sympathy, repairing the poor woman's loss out of his purse and consoling her with gentle words. Thus he could detach himself from his own private sorrows and the tragedy of his own life, to enter into the little cares and griefs of his humble flock. Thus he could be forgetful of the grandeur of the great, under whose patronage and not far from

The Masque of Gipsies

whose gates he dwelt, considering before them the necessity of those poorer souls who had been given into his spiritual guardianship. "*Sunt lachrymæ rerum*," as Virgil saith, and somehow the sense of tears in mortal things came home to me forcibly enow that golden afternoon, whilst I thought on Master Meredith's simple, holy life, and then looked on the throng of gay and careless gallants and fair women assembled in the shade of Wilton's mighty trees.

In sooth, had it not been for Ambrosia playing in the masque, I could have spent all the time in gazing at the audience rather than on the actors. What parts of thrilling interest some there had already played in life's drama and others were yet to play. I could but gaze long on Walsingham's daughter, widowed of two heroes and soon to change her religion and marry a third husband. Beside her was her daughter, offspring of her wedlock with Sir Philip. I had seen Elizabeth Sidney before, as my lady had had much to do in the bringing up of her adored brother's child. Sweet and grave and fresh as a flower to look upon, she deserved to be loved for her own sake as well as her noble father's. At that time she was the wife of my Lord Rutland, to whom she had been some two years happily wed. And I could scarce take my eyes off the face of Lady Rich, who had been appointed to a post in Queen Anne's bedchamber. Was this the face of Stella

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immortalized in the impassioned love sonnets of Astrophel? I could at first hardly realize that it was so, for time, which had only laid a so softening and beautifying hand on Sidney's sister, "his most dear ladie," had left deep lines on the once exquisite features of this love of his poetic fancy. False hair and powder could not well conceal the records which first an unhappy marriage and then a sinful alliance had writ on the face of Lady Penelope Rich.

The youngest beauty in attendance on the Queen was my Lady Frances Howard, then a mere child in years, but already conscious of her supreme and dazzling loveliness, which was marred methought even thus early by a hard and bold look in the lustrous eyes. The shameful drama in which she was to be the heroine was yet to be played, but the first act thereof, which opened with her enforced betrothal to the young and grave Lord Essex, stepson to her who had been his hapless father's as well as Sir Philip Sidney's lady, was not far off.

'Tis strange to be able to look back, after so many years, and recall those of life's comedies and tragedies which we have seen unfold and grow from the bud. Sometimes they have developed gradually, sometimes with awful speed, blow upon blow. Yet, howsoever much they have stirred and excited pity and terror, horror and disgust, in the spectators at the time of

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their enacting, directly they are played out and the curtain rung down upon them, they are forgot for the most part, and cease to trouble and harrow us, as do the plays we see acted in the theatres.

Who could have foreseen on that August afternoon in Wilton Park, that the young girl in white, with her slender, sylph-like form, her flawless fair skin and wealth of silken hair, was to hate the husband chosen for her with a tigerish hatred, to become infatuated with the King's favourite, not at that time risen out of obscurity through his handsome face and figure, in sooth his only recommendation ; that to the sin of their guilty love, my Lady Essex and Lord Rochester were to add the crime of murder, and yet to have their wedding celebrated with pomp and rejoicing in the Royal presence, whilst their humble accomplices suffered death on Tower Hill?

But I must not anticipate in order to relate a dark and disgraceful story which hath naught to do with mine own. Let me, rather, merely say in passing that it left its indelible stain on the not too pure surface of King James's Court, and go back to events belonging more immediately to the date of which I now write.

XIX

AN OPEN LETTER

THE King continued to sit on out of doors after the masque was over, cracking jests with his Fool and airing Latin to my lord his host. Strains of soft music and songs came from invisible musicians hid in the bosage and arbours, and mingled pleasantly with the sound of splashing fountains, and the cooing of the ringdoves and call of the wood-pecker.

During the masque an equerry had called away the King's Minister, Sir Robert Cecil, at that time on the eve of being created Earl of Salisbury, in recognition of his secret services to His Majesty when he was yet only King of Scots and Queen Elizabeth was still living.

This personage was of a very sinister, dark countenance, and of low and uneven stature, the defects of which his fine blue velvet and satin dress only ill concealed. He always reminded me of the crooked-back Richard in Master Shakespeare's history play.



WHAT THE COUNTESS SAW ON THE TERRACE.

An Open Letter

The Minister now returned to the scene of gaiety and said something in a low tone to the King, which His Majesty thought fit to answer in an extremely loud and strident voice: "A messenger from our fair cousin, the Lady Arabella! Who may he be and what's his business?"

"He is a young Mr. Seymour, a relation of your Majesty, and he beareth a packet of the utmost and most urgent import, which the lady charged him to deliver into your Majesty's hands."

"It concerneth the dastardly plot against us, I doubt not," the King said, paling and projecting his loose under-lip. "'Tis certainly commendable of the lassie, whom the villains would use to supplant me, to keep me so well advertised of their machinations. Howbeit, without her aid, a warrant hath been issued for the arrest of the whole bunch of conspirators, and I have heard already that George Brooke, Lord Cobham's brother and your brother-in-law, Master Secretary, is safely under lock and key."

I started at the name, remembering Ambrosia's and my so recent encounter with the gentleman who bore it.

"Come, bring the young Seymour hither and let him state his business," said the King. One would have thought that the King would have preferred to discuss an affair of such great weight in the privacy

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of his closet, rather than in the open air on the lawn, where his whole court was assembled, and his host and hostess with the members of their households and numerous guests from all parts of the county of Wilts within ear-shot.

But the King seemed on this occasion to welcome rather than to shrink from publicity. When young Master Seymour came forward, and bending gracefully on one knee before the monarch, kissed his royal hand, His Majesty began to converse with him in the same high-pitched key as he had spoken unto his minister. Mr. Seymour was little more than a boy, though his extremely intellectual and thoughtful face gave him the appearance of being older than his years.

“Hoots, lad! How comes it that our fair Arabella hath made thee her emissary?”

“Because, sir, I happen to be a visitor in the house of her aunt, where the lady now tarries. She greatly desired that your Majesty should have cognisance as soon as possible of the treasonable contents of this letter addressed to her by the Lord Cobham, which she received with great pain, refusing to grant an interview to the bearer thereof, who was none other than the writer’s brother, Master Brooke.”

“The scoundrel must have been arrested soon

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after. We have him and the two priests safely in durance, and 'twill not be long ere the ringleader of this foul conspiracy, Cobham, and his confederates Markham, Lord Grey, and 'rare Rawlegh,' doth keep them company."

The King pronounced the name of the great man, whilom favourite of the late Queen, with a malicious smile. His Majesty had harboured a violent prejudice against Sir Walter ere he came to the throne, and one of his first acts when he had set foot in England had been to debase him from the Captaincy of the Guard, and to decline to receive loyal addresses of welcome from him at Newark.

The packet which Mr. Seymour put into the King's hand was not sealed, and the two sheets it contained were soon fluttering in his trembling grasp. Despite his agitation, he could not refrain from commenting pedantically on the style of his kinswoman's missive, as he cast his eye over it and read certain sentences aloud to the Lord Secretary.

"Whatever affects your Majesty's safety and the welfare of the State is a matter of importance, that, albeit I cannot but regard what this lord have writ to me as even more foolish than wicked, and in fact only to be laughed at, yet I will venture to send the letter to your Majesty."

"Aye, she might have expressed herself better

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there, sir," the King said to Mr. William Seymour. "You must tell her to attend to the euphony of her sentences, and that nothing mars it so much as tautology, producing a cacaphony unpleasing to the ear."

Then the King turned to Lord Cobham's letter to the Lady Arabella, in which it was proposed to make a clean sweep of the "Fox and all his cubs," meaning himself and his council, whilst they were at Wilton House enjoying the hospitality of the Earl of Pembroke and his lady mother.

The King looked flushed and angry, and swore some terrible oaths when he had finished reading the letter. The company methought would fain have risen from their seats and not have witnessed his wrath, but out of respect to their sovereign were obliged perforce to stay where they were.

Maybe the King was thinking of another August day in his kingdom of Scotland, when he had only escaped falling a victim to the mysterious Gowrie plotters by the skin of his teeth.

"I have been a wary rat-catcher," said he. "I have laid baits for each conspirator at his own secret hole, and, sirrah, methinks all the brutes must have gotten into the trap by this time."

This reflection seemed to change his humour, and he burst out laughing.

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“’Tis verily a goodly list,” he went on, taking a greasy piece of paper from his pouch. “The Lord Cobham, the Lord Grey de Wilton, Sir Walter Raleigh, Knight, Sir Griffin Markham, Sir Edward Parham—Master George Brooke, Master Copely, Fathers Watson and Clarke. Some of these are the most ill-conditioned people in the kingdom. Two Popish priests, a Puritan peer, an atheist, two or three free-thinking libertines, and the whole lot traitors.”

I could not but breathe a prayer of thankfulness that from that “goodly list” the name of my dear Master Meredith’s son was absent. Grievous as it was not to know where Nat had gone, and to get no news of him, it was better far than the certainty would have been that he was to be punished as a traitor.

“As I said before, I have no fault to find with my fair cousin,” the King said to Mr. Seymour, in a more gracious tone. “Hie thee away, young man, and tell her this. And I commission thee to escort the lady hither to our Court at Wilton on Wednesday next, and my Master of the Ceremonies, Sir Lewis Lewknor, shall go with thee.”

It was clear that Mr. Seymour would have been better pleased to have gone alone on the errand of bringing the Lady Arabella Stuart to Wilton. He

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bowed and retired with a slow step and a cloud on his brow.

The Queen expressed her pleasure in Italian, which was her favourite language, at the summons to Court sent by the King to the Lady Arabella.

"I long to have that sweet creature about me," she said. "I shall never forget the *al fresco* entertainment she prepared for me and my children at Welbeck on our way from Scotland. It was the prettiest sight imaginable. But, Madame," she continued, turning to the Countess, "you have already given up too many of your own apartments to us. Will there be room for Arabella and her servants?"

My lady answered that either Fulestone Manor or Burcombe Grange would be set at the disposal of the newcomer and her party.

"Aye, how I hope it will be Burcombe," whispered Ambrosia, who had come and thrown herself in her gipsy dress on the grass at the Countess's feet. And at that moment a move was at last made by the royal pair towards the house, and, at this long-looked-for signal, the gathering of guests dispersed over the grounds, and soon melted away among the distant glades and avenues. Ambrosia was too restless and excited withal to fall asleep easily that night after the masque.

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I knew that she would draw the arras aside twixt our chambers, and come gliding over the silvery moonlit floor to lie beside me, but I scarce expected the vehemence with which she flung her arms about me as she said—

“I can bear it better now. Aye, methinks I can bear it quite cheerfully.”

“What canst thou bear?” I asked.

“What! Ah, I see. Because I sang and danced and anticked before them all, you have forgotten and think that I have forgot.”

“No, no,” I put in hastily. “I have not forgotten. How could I? But I would fain know, nevertheless, why you can bear it, and cheerfully withal.”

“Did’st see her? Lady Mary Talbot. She is ugly, ugly, ugly!”

Each time the word came from her lips it came with more triumphant emphasis.

“’Tis well she hath a big fortune. Her face would never bring her one. The flounce on her kirtle was thickly sewn with pearls and sapphires the size of peas. Her lace was worth a king’s ransom, and the diamond riband on her headdress, too, I warrant. But it all looked nothing on her, nothing! She had the wealth of the Indies on her back, but could become it no better than a beanstalk. And she is to be his bride—his bride! he who seeketh and adoreth

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beauty everywhere. No matter whether it be in man, woman, or beast, earth or sky. He will choose her for his wife! Nay, he cannot love her, 'tis her handsome fortune he wants, not her plain person. Aye, my lord will marry her for her fortune and for nothing else."

"And that comforts you," said I, "and makes you glad? To me it seemeth most lamentable."

She heeded not my rebuke and went on.

"I could be jealous at mention of the very name of Mrs. Fitton. I was jealous of Master Shakespeare. But I feel no envious pangs of Lady Mary. I would fainer have been loved even for five minutes and yet have lost him, than have him for ever and not be loved."

"Hush, hush! 'Tis not seemly to talk thus!" I reminded her.

"'Tis wicked, I know, very wicked. Alack, little Dove, you think that you understand, but you don't. 'Tis impossible that you can. All your book-learning and reading about it in Dante and Petrarch, all the conning of the greatest love lyrics and sonnets in the world, will not teach you to understand, till you yourself have suffered. Pray God you never may."

With this she went back to her own bed, and not many minutes after I heard half-stifled sobs coming

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from behind the arras. In a voice that had completely lost the ring of triumph with which it had proclaimed Lady Mary Talbot's dearth of charms, Ambrosia murmured twixt those sobs, "Would I had not been like my mother. What is the good of being fair?"

XX

THE LADY ARABELLA

WE were in the Grange garden, Master Meredith, Ambrosia and I, the day after my Lady Arabella Stuart had rid in at its gates with the gentlemen of her escort and her ladies-in-waiting, the servants and baggage having preceded her.

Those courtiers who had been housed at the Grange before her coming thither, had found apparently no attractions in its shady alleys, flower borders and bee-hives, and sunny fruit walks—for I had been at my wonted hour at each day to the arbour in the maze during the royal visit to Wilton, and not encountered any of them. They had indeed taken themselves off betimes to follow the King on the chase, or to swell the Queen's hawking parties, and we had heard naught of them till night, when they returned in roystering humour. Now they had been obliged to find other lodgings in Wilton town to make room for the lady who was henceforth established at the Grange for the rest of the King's visit. His Majesty had appointed Lady Arabella a butler

The Lady Arabella

and steward for her household, and twenty dishes of meat at dinner.

Since the death of Mistress Alice Langton, the Countess of Pembroke had continued her gracious permission to the occupants of the Rectory to have the run and use of the Grange gardens and pastures belonging thereto, and the presence of Lady Arabella Stuart in the house did not deter us that morning from enjoying our privilege. We were in the kitchen pleasance, where, on the warm southern wall, apricots, peaches and plums ripened apace.

Ambrosia had come to draw radishes and herbs at Mrs. Dorcas's bidding for a salat, whilst Master Meredith had called me to see the working of an experiment of Joseph's, the old Grange gardener. 'Twas to set a tree upon the north side of the wall, and at a little height to draw it through and spread it on the south side, so that the root and lower part of the stock should enjoy the freshness of the shade, and the upper boughs and fruit the comfort of the sunshine.

The morning was delicious, with sun enough to bring forth all the sweet scents the garden contained, and a fresh breeze withal to waft them to one's nostrils. Butterflies rivalling the flowers in brilliancy of colour fluttered hither and thither, and a hundred bees buzzed about the gold-encrusted faces of the

The Lady Arabella

sunflowers, the purple eyes of the larkspur, and the blushing clove-pinks. A soft veil of haze lay on the hills, rising to the sky, beyond the towers and tree-tops of Wilton, clothing their bareness in mystery.

My attention was soon drawn from the fruit tree and Master Meredith's converse with Joseph on curiosities of grafting, for I saw a lady come forth from the shadows that the dove-cote cast on the grass. She was followed by a manly figure, the youth who had been brought before the King on the afternoon of the masque, and had delivered the Lady Arabella's important missive into his hands with so grave and proud a grace.

I felt a thrill run through me as the pair advanced, for this was the much-discussed Lady Arabella herself in the company of her young cavalier. There was no mistaking her. The long golden tresses floated over her shoulders in the same fashion as on that misty autumn evening, when, at a first glance, Ambrosia had taken her for the ghost of the Leprosy Queen. She was simply and airily clad to-day in blue and white, and her footstep was so quick and light she seemed to dance as she walked. Now and again she stopped to pluck or smell a flower, with an exclamation of delight. Who could have supposed that this outwardly gay and youthful being was by

The Lady Arabella

some ten years or more the elder of her companion, William Seymour, son of Lord Beauchamp, and grandson of that old Earl of Hertford who long, long ago had been made by the late Queen so bitterly to rue his secret marriage with Katharine, the fair sister of Lady Jane Gray? How strangely doth history repeat itself in families as well as in nations. This scholarly young scion of a great and noble house, for all his pensive sober mien and deliberate gait, was contemplating a clandestine and even more rash matrimonial plunge than his grandsire's, and thereby was to incur the displeasure of his sovereign in a more awful degree.

Ambrosia came running to where Master Meredith and I were standing, her apron full of sweet herbs and radishes. "Father—see! The Lady Arabella cometh this way. You must make your excuses for our being here and thus appearing to intrude on her ladyship's privacy."

Master Meredith turned somewhat reluctantly from the espalier of apricots, and advanced a few steps to meet the lady. Despite his shy and retiring nature, he saw that this was an occasion in which he was bound in courtesy to introduce himself as the Rector of the parish. As she came along with those extraordinary swift and free motions of hers, Lady

The Lady Arabella

Arabella was singing a snatch of a nursery ditty, and the young gentleman at her side was gazing at her with worship in his eyes.

“I had a little nut-tree, and nothing would it bear
But a golden nutmeg and a silver pear.
The King of Spain’s daughter came to visit me
All for the sake of my little nut tree.”

“Pardon, sir,” the lady said to Master Meredith, breaking off in her song when she saw him. “This fresh country air and sweet place has a wondrous effect on me. I feel grown young again here and capable of divers childish follies. What a fair old garden, what a wide fertile prospect! Methinks that for all its humble roof of thatch I would liefer have the Grange than my Lord Pembroke’s fine house down there, because it standeth high on the hills and catcheth every passing breeze that blows from yonder downs. Aye, this little hamlet is a peaceful spot, with its orchard closes and square church tower. Meseemeth in such haunts of calm ’tis always Sunday. You have passed many years of your life here, you say, sir? I have a mind to envy you, for your lot hath indeed been cast in pleasant places. I should be happy if I might tarry here for ever. I would make cream and butter in the dairy, take the yellow honey from the bees, distill cordials, and hearken on Sabbaths to your

The Lady Arabella

lectures, sir, in the little grey church. 'Twould be happy such a quiet life, very happy. Would it not, Seymour?" she inquired of her companion.

"Where you found happiness, lady, I should find it too," he answered.

"Happiness! Happiness!" She repeated the word with a sigh of yearning, and a great wave of melancholy came of a sudden over her winsome face, like a dark cloud passing before the sun in an April sky. "Happiness is not for me."

The young man made as if he would have protested, but she quickly changed the subject and turned to us with a smile that chased all heaviness from her fair countenance.

"I have seen both these maidens before," said she. "I never forget faces."

"They are my daughter Ambrosia and my ward Jeanne Trefusis," Master Meredith explained, laying his hand on my shoulder as he pronounced my name.

"I have seen them before, but where—where was it?" She knit her brows, and ran her fingers, which sparkled with gems, through her hair as if trying to recollect.

"'Twas in the lane, my lady, by Fugglestone Chapel," Ambrosia said, "the autumn you came to Wilton House and your horse cast a shoe on the road."

The Lady Arabella

"I did not think 'twas so long ago as that," Lady Arabella replied, "but now you recall it, I remember it was there that I met you. And with you was the prettiest stripling I ever set eyes on—the double of yourself. I should like to see him again too. Shall I be so lucky? Is he here?"

"No," Ambrosia replied. "No, madame. Nat is not here."

"Aye, gone to the foreign wars belike! A gallant soldier he'll be, I doubt not."

If the Lady Arabella, as she said, never forgot faces her clear blue eyes methought were also quick to read them. It was evident that she gathered from Master Meredith's painfully compressed lips, and from Ambrosia's downcast looks, that the subject of Nat was one 'twould be well to avoid, for, without waiting to hear whether he had gone to the wars or no, she asked me what book it was I had under my arm.

It chanced to be Erasmus's *Manual of a Christian Knight*, and Lady Arabella was well acquainted with it. In sooth, there were few books of worth with which in her wide reading she had not become familiar. She was a great book-lover, and knew the respective merits of an Aldine and an Elzevir at a glance. In the great household of her grandmother, Bess of Hardwick, "little Lady Arbel's" education had been made a matter of primary importance, and many

The Lady Arabella

learned scholars had been her tutors and governors at different times, and had pronounced her an apt and serious pupil. Yet she was passionately fond withal of the "things that perish," of fine raiment, jewels, and gauds; and in supplying herself with these vanities and in giving presents—for her generosity was unbounded—she was ever in debt, even when the King made her an allowance more in proportion to her position than the beggarly pittance which had been doled out by Queen Elizabeth for her maintenance. But all this I learned by degrees in after days.

A pleasant discourse, in which young Mr. Seymour joined, on certain books which were favourites both of the Lady Arabella's and Master Meredith's was interrupted by the appearance of another gentleman on the scene. Judging by that appearance, he was a coxcomb of the first water. His long rapier seemed much to inconvenience him as he came with swaggering step down the flowery path, and got entangled with the lace on his high boots and clanked against his spurs. His doublet was slashed in all directions with white satin and elaborately embroidered with gold and seed pearls. The waxed ends of his moustachios tapered upwards and almost touched the brim of his sugar-loaf hat, which was adorned with jewelled bands and scarlet feathers. The Lady Arabella

The Lady Arabella

regarded the approach of this splendid personage with evident dismay.

"Sir Lewis Lewknor again," she murmured. "I beseech you, William, not to resume the quarrel of yesterday, however offensive the gentleman may be disposed to make himself."

William Seymour drew his tall figure erect, and, mindful of the sweet lady's admonition, confined himself to glances of haughty disapproval, when the newcomer with a sweeping bow, somewhat resembling a dancing-master's, drew near and said :

"I am charged by His Majesty, madame, to bring the Lady Arabella Stuart into his presence on a pressing business in the drawing-room at Wilton House, where he holdeth his Council this day at noon."

"I will prepare myself to come instantly," said the lady. She had grown very pale, and her expressive face reflected the distress of her mind. 'Twas nigh impossible to believe that this was the same bright creature who had come dancing along 'twixt the flower-borders not many minutes ago, a-singing out of the joyaunce of her heart "I had a little nut-tree," so sad and troubled she looked, as, after taking courteous leave of us, she turned and walked towards the house.

The two gentlemen followed at a little distance ;

The Lady Arabella

the younger one, whose dress was bare of ornament and finery, displaying in his bearing that air of fine breeding which the other so conspicuously lacked.

It would seem that angry words had passed 'twixt them on the ride through Salisbury to Wilton on the previous day. The Master of the Ceremonies had resented that Mr. Seymour took upon himself to help the Lady Arabella to mount, had called him "saucy," and had asserted his claim to ride at her right hand, in which Mr. Seymour had not acquiesced. An exchange of recriminations followed which must in troth have spoiled the pleasures of the journey for Lady Arabella and Mr. Seymour. Whether or not these recriminations were renewed 'twixt Burcombe and Wilton, when the same party set forth again together that morning, I cannot say. But, before sunset, Luke brought the news to Mrs. Dorcas that two gentlemen of the Court had been crossing swords in a coppice without the walls of the park, and that one had been wounded and was keeping his bed. The story of the affray had not yet reached the King's ears, but it assuredly would, and then the combatants would be called to account. The business transacted by the King in the drawing-room at Wilton was the examination of some of the minor actors in the conspiracy, which had been entered into with Count Aremberg of Spain, to eject His Majesty from

The Lady Arabella

the throne, the unmasking of which had caused such intense excitement. Lady Arabella had been summoned to see if she could identify these prisoners with the men she had once overheard in treasonable conference at an inn. No wonder the poor lady had turned pale as she took her leave of us, if she had guessed this was the errand on which she had been called to the King's presence. Her tender heart would naturally shrink from such a task; and, indeed, as we heard later from the Countess, she had succeeded tactfully in evading it, without giving offence to the King, and won thereby the eternal gratitude of one of the unfortunate prisoners.

XXI

AMBROSIA TAKES HER FLIGHT

METHINKS that at this point Ambrosia, were she here, might well borrow my pen and continue this narrative for me, though belike, if she did so, 'twould grow to too great a length and wander far from what more concerneth me and my intercourse with Sidney's sister, my "most dear ladie."

Truth to say, Ambrosia's story, if it were writ, would fill a volume by itself and be another story altogether. It would tell of how through being the unintentional witness of a love scene 'twixt the Lady Arabella and Mr. Seymour in the arbour at the Grange, she became that lady's sworn and devoted servant, leaving her country life and home to follow her through good and evil fortune, being present hereafter at her secret bridal; her companion in restraint and attempted flight, and her comforter in prison and in death. The day after the meeting which I have described with the Lady Arabella in the garden, a strange freak of fate took Ambrosia, and not me, beneath the honeysuckle canopy to the

Ambrosia takes her Flight

inner room of the little garden-house, where lay the inkhorn and quill once used by Sir Philip when he writ certain sheets of the *Arcadia*.

'Twas I who was in the habit of passing countless hours there in summer morns and evenings since the first dear interview I had had on its threshold with my lady. There dreaming of the poet-hero, reading and re-reading his works, his ghostly presence seemed ever near ; and I sought inspiration therefrom for my own poor efforts at versifying. Ambrosia, on the other hand, seldom darkened the door of the sweet retreat save to drag me forth from it, mayhap to watch from the crest of the hill the harriers in full cry after a miserable little hare, or to take a hand with the milkmaids in milking the Grange cows, or to scamper to the woods to gather wild raspberries and wood-sorrel.

She said she would not have gone thither that day had she not thought to find me there, but when she saw 'twas void, she sat down on the rustic bench, and beheld, to her surprise, a lute tied by a pink ribbon knot, and lying on't a lace cambric handkerchief with the monogram A.S. embroidered and set daintily in a garland. " Ah," thought she, " another dove hath been making its nest here to-day." And the next moment she heard voices of a lady and gentleman in converse quite near her on the moss-grown steps without.

Ambrosia takes her Flight

“Lady, I have been seeking you in this maze this half-hour.”

“And I you, sir,” with a merry laugh.

“Such distracting places of separation as labyrinths and mazes, methinks, were created for those who would fain kill time, not for two who would hug every precious fleeting second because it may be the last they spend together, the last at least for three years to come.”

“The last, the last for three years! What do you mean, dear Seymour?” the Lady Arabella asked in accents of consternation.

“The King hath this morning commanded me to live for three years outside his realm as a punishment for wounding his Master of the Ceremonies.”

“Alack! why did you fight? Why did you not treat his insults with contempt? Did not I beseech you not to be rash?”

The lady whose gay laugh had rung out so musically a minute before now fell to weeping and sobbing on the young man’s shoulder.

He consoled her as only lovers know how to console each other. For these two, despite the disparity of years betwixt them, were lovers, albeit no one at that time guessed it. This ’twas that made Ambrosia’s situation so embarrassing.

She declared that she hesitated to come forth from

Ambrosia takes her Flight

the inner room of the arbour for fear of robbing the pair of any of those priceless moments of such value to them. Yet, to tarry within, meant to be discovered as an eavesdropper at last, for the lady would certainly return for her lute and handkerchief. So Ambrosia laid her hands on her ears rather than overhear the soft endearments and vows of constancy which were exchanged by the two about perforce to part. And in this attitude my Lady Arabella found Ambrosia when she re-entered the arbour.

“ Well that ’tis you, beautiful girl, and not one of mine own handmaidens or gentlewomen that I find here,” she said, taking her handkerchief and wiping traces of tears from her blue eyes. “ By an accident you know our secret, but you are to be trusted with it. Mistress Meredith, you remember what I said, that I never forget faces? I might have added thereto that I never misread them. I read yours at a glance long ago that autumn evening. Faithfulness and sincerity I read there then, and I read the same there to-day. True and devoted, methinks, you would be in service. Would I might have such a one about me, one whom I could implicitly trust ! ”

“ Your secret, dear madame, is as safe with me as it would be at the bottom of the sea,” Ambrosia made fervid answer. “ Only tell me how I can render

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you service, and I will render it so gladly—oh, so gladly !”

Then the Lady Arabella smiled her captivating, sunny smile, despite her recent distress.

“Run home,” said she, “and ask that good and reverend gentleman your father to let me have the charge of you when I go from hence with the Court. Nay, I will crave you of him myself. Go and prepare him for a visitation from me this very evening at six of the clock.”

Ambrosia fell on her knees and kissed the lady’s hand. “’Tis a high honour for my father, Madam,” she said ; “methinks he must consent to any request your ladyship doth make of him in person.”

When Ambrosia came in, full of this adventure, I was with Master Meredith in the study, for he was using my hand, as he sometimes did, to write his letters ; both the Countess and he being pleased to admire my penmanship, and to prefer it to their own

Master Meredith was leaning back in his arm-chair, resting his silver head wearily against the carven back. He had been called from his bed in the night to minister to a dying parishioner, and had taken no refreshing sleep since. Indeed, the only rest and refreshment he had sought had been that of translating an ode of Horace. That which I was writing to his dictation was an epistle to his

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dear Master Dean and very good friend, excusing himself, on the ground of excessive weariness, from riding into Sarum to sup with him and my Lord Bishop that night. As if to console himself for being forced to forego what was always a pleasure, Master Meredith touched on some of the topics in his letter, which would belike have been discussed at the Dean's table. These ranged from a short disquisition on the absurdity of the Ciceronians (*à propos* of the King's pronunciation of Latin), who admitted no author save Tully to be read or quoted, nor any word soever not in his writings to be used,—to the King's visit to Wilton, the presence of the fair Lady Arabella Stuart at Burcombe Grange, and the forthcoming trial at Winchester of the conspirators.

“We all know what excellent precepts for the training of the young His Majesty hath laid down in his *Basilicon Doron*, that book lately published for the benefit of the youthful and promising Prince Henry. But, alas! so little doth His Majesty's practice seem in accord with what he preacheth in those admirable pages, that in the presence of this son of tender years and delicate nurture, he is heard to swear foul oaths, and seen to comport himself in a manner that those who are most loyal to his person cannot call kingly.”

So far had Master Meredith dictated when his

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daughter appeared before him in considerable excitement.

“Father,” she began, “father, my lady Arabella cometh hither to the Rectory this evening to ask a favour of you. Nay, how can I say a favour? She putteth it so, but methinks, if you consent, as you assuredly will, father, ’twill be granting no favour, only accepting a great privilege for me, your daughter. This lady, father, hath a fancy to take me away with her in her service. Naught methinks *now* could give me greater happiness. You will say yes, father; you will be proud to let me go.” A slight flush rose to Master Meredith’s brow. He looked for a moment somewhat startled. His first words were spoken involuntarily :

“Then I shall have no child.”

“Don’t say that. There will always be Jeanne. You know, father, that I would not go without your leave. I would never disobey you, *never*. But you will give me your leave. You will say, when you have thought on’t and spoken with the Lady Arabella, that it is best for me to go.”

“All this doth remind me of something that I have forgot most remissly to mention to you, child. ’Tis some little time since, that my Lord Bishop hath proposed to me for your hand to bestow on his son, Robert Cotton. The young man hath comported

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himself well and steadily in his law studies at the Inns of Court, and now hath begun a practice of his own in Milford Street, Salisbury. He can provide for you a goodly home there, and, methinks, would make thee a worthy husband."

Ambrosia flung back her raven locks with an air of impatient scorn.

"What do I know, forsooth, of Master Robert Cotton, more than that he once was a clumsy, loutish boy, who tossed me out of the swing in the Palace Garden? Sithence, methinks, I have scarce set eyes on him, save at service in the Cathedral, when he hath looked as if he could not say bo to a goose."

"My dear, speak not of any suitor, however unacceptable you may deem him, so contemptuously. Remember that this young man hath, at least, done naught to forfeit your respect, if he hath not been so fortunate as to win your affection."

"Win my affection!" echoed Ambrosia. "How could he? What chance has he had, poor Bob! Oh, father, if you knew—if you knew! Your great and wondrous knowledge of far-off past things, of the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans hath kept you, mefeareth, somewhat ignorant of what passeth under your nose at the present day. Nay, dear father, I mean not to be disrespectful. I would not reproach you for the world. But if you had seen

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what has not escaped others—Jeanne, for instance, and the Countess, my godmother—you would know how useless and vain 'tis to talk to me of a home of my own in Milford Street, or anywhere else. There is one, and one only, to whom I could have brought all that love and worship which a wife should give her lord and husband—but he—he——” there was a tremor in her voice—“'Tis fitting that he weds with one of as high birth as himself—foolishly, I know now how foolish 'twas, I thought once . . .” She paused to choke back her tears, then added wildly, “I cannot speak of it. I will never speak of it. Jeanne must tell you if you would fain know the rest.”

And the poor child ran from the room, leaving me to make the best explanation I could to her bewildered father.

So I told Master Meredith how Ambrosia had lost her young heart irrevocably long ago to my Lord of Pembroke, and none knew it better than my lord. And if he could not be blamed for a country-bred maid falling in love with his fine and stately person and irresistible charm of manner, which was likely enow to happen, he had assuredly been to blame, methought, for much,—for meaning glances, secret meetings, and stolen caresses, all to him doubtless mere gallantry such as young men of the world may regard as part of their lawful amusements, but which

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to the maid in her innocence seemed of too sweet seriousness to be taken lightly. Ambrosia had verily at times cherished the fond dream of being my lord's betrothed and wedded wife. Countess of Pembroke and Lady of Wilton, said I. What wonder then that to talk of her marrying Bob Cotton and living happily ever after in an attorney's house in Sarum, seemed to Ambrosia a hollow mockery. None of my Lord Bishop's other nine sons could have a grain of hope of winning her any more than Bob; nor any of the young esquires of the country round. Had not Philip Massinger long since seen the uselessness of pressing his suit, though he still loved her? Ambrosia was not like other girls whose hearts could be broke and easily mended again in a very short space. She was made of truer, more steadfast stuff withal.

I must confess that when I had finished in greater heat than was my wont, Master Meredith still looked bewildered.

"This is all news to me," he said at last. "My child's heart broke and I in ignorance of its ever being touched." He gave a deep sigh. "It seemeth that my children have given you more of their confidence, little Jeanne, than they have me, their own father. How have I failed in this most sacred relationship? for I see that I have failed, despite my earnest prayers that I might be guided aright in the nurturing

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up of my boy and girl. One hath long since taken his own way without my leave, and the other now begs it to do likewise ; at the same time she reveals that her young life is unhappy, and hath been marred by one who is held in highest esteem, not only for his brilliant position and for the sake of his gallant uncle's deathless memory, and the most honourable and perfect lady his mother, but for his own. 'Tis indeed a sad state of things. I have been too trusting, too trusting belike. But I never looked for danger in that quarter, nor did any warn me of such."

"Dear sir, do not look so sorrowful, do not reproach yourself so bitterly!" I found myself kneeling beside his chair, as I had done on that winter night when Nat had gone from the room after his last appeal. "You could not have helped what has happened to Ambrosia, for however much a daughter may be under her father's direction and control, there is one thing he is powerless to direct and control in her, and that is where and when her heart shall love."

And as I said this I thought that he must know the truth of it better than most, for he would never have found Zdenka in the churchyard, had fathers been able to force their daughters into loving at their command.

"Ambrosia hath suffered," I went on, "but she

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will not brood selfishly on her own trouble. She would fain forget it in being of service and use to another, this fair and winsome lady who requires her. So, dear sir, let her go! Mayhap this lady feels that the time is coming when she will need one about her of whom she can make a friend, of whose good faith and honesty she can be sure as of the daylight. It will be well to let Ambrosia go with her. I am sure it will be well." I clasped my hands on his knee and looked into the dear tired transparent face.

"The Lord's ways are not our ways," he murmured. "Belike you are right, but, ere I decide, I will ask the advice of the Countess, Ambrosia's god-mother."

This he did not do. For when my Lady Arabella Stuart came, she exercised all her sweet persuasiveness and most rare personal charm to get her way with Master Meredith, and she got it. He yielded, and, on the day the Court left Wilton for Woodstock, Ambrosia went with it, in attendance on her who was then its reigning star.

XXII

AMBROSIA BECOMES A LETTER-WRITER

AND now Ambrosia had her own dear lady, as I had mine. The King stood in such fear of the plague that the Court kept away from London. At Woodstock there was much hunting and hawking, pastimes in which the Lady Arabella took little delight, though she was a graceful and fearless rider. "My Lady Arbel," writ Ambrosia from thence, "misliketh much the sight of creatures hunted down and in pain. The bleeding heron maketh her shudder. She readeth tomes as deep and learned as thou delightest in, Jeanne, and heareth lectures in company with the young Prince. But methinks she loveth most to write letters. These she for ever writeth to the Lord Shrewsbury, her uncle, and the Lady Shrewsbury, her aunt, both of whom she holdeth in the same dearness as were they her parents. She often appeareth sad when in the retirement of her own chamber, and sigheth thinking on the banishment of Mr. Seymour, I doubt not ; but whilst she writes to Lady Shrewsbury she oftenest hath that bright sweet

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smile on her face that you know. Sometimes she laughs aloud over some quip she hath writ down and readeth it out to us, that is, to me and little Mistress Margaret Byron, who counteth but ten years, and is the youngest of her maids, and my Lady Arbel's pet. Methinks 'tis because my lady writeth so many letters that I have taken to letter writing likewise, to bear her company therein. It surpriseth me how little irksome I find this occupation, and it pleaseth me, too, that my father taketh satisfaction therein and saith my handwriting and style are somewhat improved."

By the time Ambrosia had writ half-a-dozen letters home Master Meredith said more than this. He praised Ambrosia's epistolary gift, which belike had never been discovered if she had not left home, and he took keen delight in each letter that came, whether addressed to himself or to me. What a difference twould have made, methought, if Nat had once written home. Belike he too would have found that he was no unskilled driver of a quill had he but tried to describe his adventures and fortunes beyond the sea, his wanderings in new countries, and all the wonders and glories of the tropics. But no line had Nat ever penned, or, if he had, it had not reached Burcombe.

Many held, and Mrs. Dorcas amongst them, that Nat

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had met some untoward fate in foreign lands or been shipwrecked and lay in an ocean grave. I know not what Master Meredith thought, for he never spoke of Nat, and none, according to his wish and command, breathed his name in his presence. But I always felt certain that mine and Ambrosia's prayers must be answered, that we should see Nat again, that he would come home at last, maybe bringing his sheaves with him.

Nat was much in my mind whilst the great trial was proceeding in Winchester that autumn, the Courts of Law having been moved owing to the plague from London to Sarum's sister city.

In dull November weather the King and Queen took up their abode in Winchester Castle, and whilst His Majesty and Council were absorbed in the unravelling of the intricate conspiracies, called respectively the Bye and the Main plots, the frivolous Queen and her ladies found time hang heavily enow on their hands, and wished themselves back at Wilton. To pass the long evenings merrily they even played on the Queen's side of the castle divers babyish games, such as—"Blind Man's Buff," "Rise, Piggie, go"—and one night, getting hold of certain articles that had belonged to her late Majesty's gorgeous wardrobe, they dressed up and masqueraded in the same, which indecent mummery was assuredly an

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outrage to the great memory of the dead Queen, and very properly resented by those older ladies-in-waiting who had served in Queen Elizabeth's coffer-room and bed-chamber.

Ambrosia writ of these frivolities and follies at which she said her mistress smiled, though at heart they disgusted her; but the chief burden of Ambrosia's letter out of Winchester was the trial in which the Lady Arabella could not but be deeply interested, though absolved from all complicity in the conspiracy which had been hatched in her name.

The events passing at Winchester had a special significance too for Ambrosia apart from their so nearly concerning the lady she served. The arch-conspirator who stood then on his trial, who was involved up to the hilt in both the Bye and the Main plots, was that Master George Brooke, who had been of the evil company at Sturton, to whom Nat had lost money at cards, and with whom Ambrosia and I had had so extraordinary a chance encounter on the eve of his arrest.

"We, I and others of my Lady Arabella's gentlewomen, did attend her this day and yesterday," Ambrosia wrote, "to a gallery in the Courts of Justice at the Palace, where she sat beside the Lord High Admiral. Lord Cecil, standing at the Council board before the judges, said, 'There hath been touched

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upon the Lady Arabella Stuart, a near kinswoman of the King. Let us not scandalize the innocent by confusion of speech. She is as innocent of these things as any here, only she received a letter from my Lord Cobham to prepare her for the proceedings of the conspirators, which she laughed at and directly sent it the King. So far was she from being malcontent, that she laughed the conspirator Cobham to scorn.' At this my mistress grew pale and trembled, but she whispered something to her neighbour, my Lord Nottingham, the Lord High Admiral (who hath lately married the Lady Margaret Stuart, her cousin, though he is old enow to be her grandfather), and he stood up and declared, 'The lady here doth protest upon her salvation that she never dealt in any of these things, and so she willeth me to tell the Court.' Then my Lord Cecil again spoke on the Lady Arabella's behalf, saying that my Lord Cobham would have come to speak with her to tell her of those about the King who would fain disgrace her; but she doubted this was but a trick. Next that devil-may-care Master Brooke avowed that his brother, Lord Cobham, had urged him to procure Lady Arabella to write letters to the King of Spain, but he had never gotten her to do it. Sir Walter Raleigh, looking very grey and sick, spoke insultingly of the lady. 'She was a woman,' said he, 'with whom he had no

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acquaintance, and of all whom he ever saw, he liked her the least.' This Sir Walter is so hated by the mob that when he was brought hither to Winchester his coach was stormed with tobacco pipes and brick-bats, and 'twas thought he might not be got through alive. And I hated him, too, when I heard him speak with such rudeness of the loveliest lady in the world. But 'twas only for that minute that I hated him, not afterwards, when he was tormented and bellowed at and entangled in his speech by Mr. Attorney Coke, a terrible blatant bully, who called Sir Walter 'viper' and 'traitor,' and yet failed to prove him a traitor. He denied all knowledge of my Lord Cobham's plots, and did as much as wit of man could devise to clear himself. 'Twas wonderful, the wit, learning and courage he displayed in his defence. You, dear father, would have admired him for it ! His supposed guilt resteth alone on my Lord Cobham's word, but as my Lord Cobham saith one day that Sir Walter helped him, and the next that he did not, which account is one to believe, or how is he to be believed at all ? Sir Walter did beg with passion to be confronted with my lord, but 'twas refused. He swore that he had been the life-long enemy of Spain, as was notorious. Would he then be such a madman as to play Jack Cade now at her bidding, to dance when she pulled the strings ? He did look so tall

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and grand and glowered so fiercely at his judges. Certainly he is not guilty, but 'tis as certain that he will be condemned. So will they all. And how much this saddeneth and oppresseth my Lady Arabella may be imagined. Yet her spirits are so naturally gay withal that they cannot easily be crushed. She doth make exceeding merry over the Queen's secretary, Master Fowler, who is head over ears in love with Lady Arabella. He sighs and groans, and writes sonnets which she saith are execrably bad. But Master Fowler declares he only is worthy to worship at a distance, he dare not attempt her. Another, the Prince of Anhalt, presses his suit in letters writ in Latin. Yet she nothing liketh his letters nor his Latin. The Queen's brother, Duke Ulric of Holstein, said to be a comely man, is also a suitor of my Lady Arabella's. Here is a song that my lady singeth to her lute. 'Tis of her own composing, and methinks 'twill please Jeanne :

Who is the boy comes stealing here
With looks demure and mild?
Keep off, keep off! Let him not near!
There's malice in that child.

You see, he plays amidst the flowers
As innocent as they,
His smile as bright as summer hours,
His eyes as soft as May.

Ambrosia becomes a Letter-writer

Beauty and grace his garments are,
To sport seems all his joy!
Gaze, if thou wilt, but keep him far,
There's danger in the boy.

How divers are his gladsome smiles,
His every nod is bright;
Sure there can be no wicked wiles
Within that thing of light?

Look! he holds out a flower to me;
A rosebud like a gem.
Keep him afar! Dost thou not see
The thorns upon the stem?

Vain was the warning given; the maid
Clasped to her heart the boy,
But could not pluck him thence; he stayed,—
And stayed but to destroy.

“Since we have been here in this grey old castle,
I ofttimes feel cramped and cribbed, spacious as it is.
I am homesick withal for the country, mine own dear
breezy downs that are so high they melt into the sky.
Aye, I long for the larks and the lambs, and Salisbury
spire, that seemeth to follow you up hill and down
dale at all points of the compass, which Winchester's
low tower doth not, though fair it be near at hand.
In October days I did shut my eyes and picture the
hedgerows at home, a-fire with red and gold brambles.
Poets talk of the spring, but methinks 'tis in autumn
that the air is most like wine, and maketh the blood
race through one's veins. At Woodstock I would

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fain have roamed the woods, but perforce we must follow Her Majesty, riding her fat white palfrey on the jog-trot chase of a buck. The eternal hunting giveth Lady Arabella the toothache, and racketh her bones. . . . ”

’Twas with a smile of pride and pleasure that Master Meredith handed this letter to my Lady Pembroke for perusal.

He and I had been bidden to Wilton to dine privately with the Countess, the high state of the great household being somewhat abated in the absence of my lord, who had gone to Winchester on the special mission of interceding with the King on Sir Walter Raleigh’s behoof. The Earl’s brother Philip was now attached altogether to the Court, the King on his visit to Wilton being so well pleased with his handsome looks and prowess in the hunting-field, that he had lavished favours and titles upon him, creating him a Knight and Earl of Montgomery in one day.

There were no guests at present in the house besides the permanent needy ones, busy in the “Areopagus,” writing those endless works, whose chances of immortality rested on her ladyship’s acceptance of their diffuse and ornate dedications. A sort of lull, as it were, reigned at Wilton before the bustle entailed by the return thither of the Court which was expected to take place in the early days of

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December. 'Twas very pleasant to pass from the chill, grey, sunless world without into the warmth and colour of the lordly house, with its glow of paintings and tapestries, and feel one's feet sinking deep into soft Arabian carpets or scented rushes, as one passed through ante-chambers and gallery into the Countess's sweet and gracious presence. It seemed almost as if the sun must be shining in the cabinet, so irradiated was it by the brightness of the needlework Arcadian pictures and the splendour of my Lady's "Sidney hair."

She was mightily charmed with Ambrosia's letter, and praised it as much as Master Meredith could desire.

"To think," said my lady smiling, "how difficult 'twas when my goddaughter was a little maid, to guide her chubby hand into making a pothook. What weepings and whippings attended her tasks! And here on her first flight from home, without any practice in the art, she blossometh forth into a rare writer of news-letters, and seldom is news conveyed with such goodly expression and observant touches. From Jeanne we should have expected it, but from Ambrosia, I must confess, the most I should have looked for in the shape of a letter would have been a few blotted lines, dashed off post-haste, to say she was well, and no more."

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"Ah, my lady, that is because you do not know Ambrosia as I know her," said I eagerly. "Ambrosia is a poem in herself; a most beautiful poem. The winds, the hills, and the trees and running brooks have taught her their secret. She is a part of them."

"So much I knew, little Jeanne. She is a child of nature, but that scarcely accounts for the power of expression," the Countess answered.

Then she fell to conversing of Sir Walter Raleigh's case. "It would be a grave blot," said she, "on the first year of the King's reign if His Majesty should be so ill-advised as to let personal rancour overrule justice." My lady then spoke of Sir Walter's many-sided mind, like a cut diamond flashing out rays in divers directions. 'Twas more as the man of letters than as the colonizer and gentleman-adventurer that she appreciated him, but, belike, most of all she felt sympathy with Sir Walter because he seemed to her to belong to the time in which her idolized brother had lived his brief but glorious life, to that past which to her was ever present.

In her youth, when the Court of Elizabeth was at the zenith of its splendour and chivalry, she had seen the meteoric career which began with the spontaneous knightly act of casting a gorgeous cloak into the mud for the Queen to walk upon. 'Twas true that since then the star of Raleigh had not always

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shone with undimmed lustre, but had often been obscured by murky clouds. Yet who would wish to see it sunk for ever in unmerited disgrace and shame?

It was the Countess who had besought her son to go to Winchester to use his influence with the King to plead for Raleigh's life. But without my lord's intercession that life was to be grudgingly spared. The great knight, like a snared eagle, was to languish for twelve long years in prison, and then to go forth to meet, after all, his averted doom.

XXIII

TWELFTH NIGHT

WILTON was all a-stir again when the December snows cast a mantle of purest white on the fair house and park, and lay as high as the door-knockers in the streets of the little town. I never looked out on the snow glittering in the moonlight without recalling the night that I had met Nat as I came from Mistress Alice Langton's death-bed, and often I wished that I could recall, in another sense, the harsh and angry words I had spoken then, for assuredly, however great our abhorrence of a sin, we as Christians should hold the sinner in loving pity. I was more accustomed now, though none the less shocked, to seeing gentlemen, aye, and even ladies, flushed and talking gibberish from too deep indulgence in their wine-cups, and, alas! 'twas the visits of the Court to Wilton which had made this a more common experience.

Ere the frost and snow had set in and while a misty rain was still falling, the conspirators at Winchester had been brought one by one on to the

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scaffold, and whilst preparing to meet their Maker, each had been reprieved with the exception of George Brooke, who, 'twas said, met death with the same nonchalant and callous air that he had assumed through life.

King James had hearkened to his councillors who had advised clemency, and to the Spanish Ambassador, the first that had been in England for twenty years, Don Juan de Taxis, who also pleaded for the prisoners' lives. Yet, first of all he could not deny himself the pleasure of mystification, and affecting to be deaf to all prayers for mercy, signed the death-warrants; so that every one at Wilton expected on a certain Friday, at nine of the clock, to hear of the execution of Lords Grey and Cobham, and Sir Griffin Markham, and Sir Walter Raleigh. Great then was the feeling of relief when His Majesty assembled his Council in the drawing-room of Wilton House, and imparted to them what none suspected, that he had despatched a messenger privily to Winchester to stay the executions. The unhappy gentlemen, therefore, had gone back whence they came to durance in the Tower of London, and their Majesties had settled down to enjoy uninterruptedly once more the superb entertainments devised for their delight by their noble host at Wilton.

To one of these Master Meredith and I came down

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from the Rectory, over the crisp snow, under a starlit sky, and my dear guardian, I verily believe, was as excited as I was, for the play was to be *Twelfth Night*, by William Shakespeare. The King, quilted and padded in amber-coloured taffetas, with his hose wrinkling over his ankles, sat within the ruddy glare of the logs blazing on the open hearth. Behind his chair stood the jester, Archie, in cap and bells, who His Majesty, at the end of the first act, vowed with loud guffaws had been completely outmatched by the fool on the stage. Lines of servants, with the Wyvern badge on their sleeve, held torches which lighted the great hall, and beneath its lofty roof was gathered a company more remarkable and illustrious even than that which had sat on the sward of the park in August to witness Master Ben Jonson's Masque. My Lady Arabella Stuart, a host in herself for beauteous looks and wondrous jewels, was seated at the Queen's right hand, and 'twas noticed among the guests that one of her young gentlewomen possessed a beauty that would have surpassed her own had it not been of such a different character that its darkness by contrast made Lady Arabella's fairness the more dazzling.

My lady's brother, Sir Robert Sidney, soon afterwards Lord de Lisle, who had not been at the Masque, had come from Penshurst with his daughter

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Mary, she who had inherited the Sidneys' true love of poesie, and exercised it in writing a continuation of Sir Philip's *Arcadia*. Again I beheld the ladies so imperishably associated with the dead hero, one as his wife, the other as the Stella of his sonnets,—the Countess of Essex and Lady Penelope Rich. The latter, jointly with his daughter, the Countess of Rutland, had, my lady told Master Meredith, just accepted the dedication of Master Florio's translation of the second book of Montaigne's Essays.

The French and Spanish Ambassadors were there, the latter much gazed upon as somewhat of a novel curiosity. He had been winning popularity amongst the lords and ladies of the Court by bestowing gifts on them of Spanish gloves, hawks' hoods, leather for jerkins, and rare perfumes. The ladies were all very gracious to Don Juan de Taxis in consequence, and even Lady Arabella, Ambrosia said, preferred him to the grave Duc de Sully. Yet methought he was a coxcombish-looking person, full of exaggerated airs, and the superior grace and fine courtesy which were regarded as typical traits of the Spanish hidalgo, were, in sooth, more in evidence in my Lord Pembroke, who did the honours of his house with such consummate dignity and charm of manner. My Lord's Steward, Master Massinger, in his velvet livery and gold chain, moved hither and thither very

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importantly. His son Philip, now a tall, self-possessed young man, living in London, and familiar with the lounge in great St. Paul's, the ordinaries and theatres round about, and the company of "the Globe," had eyes for but one face in that assembly of bravely-clad gallants and fair women,—the dark, gipsy face of the girl who had bewitched him in childhood, whom at a distance he still adored, albeit he held himself proudly aloof from her. Philip was heard to whisper to Master Massinger, ere the curtain went up on *Illyria*, "Thou hadst best absent thyself, father, from the play, unless thou mindest not getting thy toes trod on. One of thy office is mercilessly ridiculed and scurvily used withal in this most humorous dainty comedy."

Oh matchless magic, indisputable sway of genius! Behind that curtain was but a rough label to say 'twas *Illyria*, but no sooner had it risen than every man and woman in the hall of Wilton House was transported to that very country. We were landed on the sea-coast with the sweet shipwrecked *Viola*, who put off her maiden weeds to serve as a page the love-lorn duke; we went with her to the house of *Olivia*, where the page woos for his master the lady who hath sworn to mourn her dear dead for seven years, and not to be seen of men, but is so won by the mock page's gentle comeliness and "masterly

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manner of speech," that she draws aside the veil and shows that beauty

"Truly blent whose red and white
Nature's own sweet and cunning hand laid on."

The once obdurate lady makes haste to match with the pretty page or one she believes to be he, who in reality is Sebastian, Viola's brother, and then my lord Duke mendeth his heart apace, and she who hath served him so loyally in boy's habit becomes his loving wife and "fancy's queen."

What peals of merry laughter resounded through the marble hall and echoed in the groined roof, laughter in which the King joined, shaking his sides, at the roystering kinsman of the Lady Olivia, Sir Toby Belch, who carouses with his boon companions in her house, and the trick that they and the roguish gentlewoman play off on the steward, poor vain Malvolio—a steward truly of a very different type from good Master Massinger, who made merry over the mimic steward's discomfiture with the rest of the audience. Still, methought, Malvolio had his counterpart present in the person of the Queen's secretary, Master Fowler, he who was so hopelessly and ridiculously amorous of Lady Arabella Stuart and for ever casting sheep's eyes at her. One could picture Master Fowler strutting in yellow stockings "cross-gartered," and declaiming pompously that "some are born

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great, some achieve greatness, and some have greatness thrust upon them." Not but that I felt a sharp stab of pity for Malvolio, when he was brought forth from his durance in such a sorry plight and found how cruelly he had been tricked and fooled. I had known the same feeling in a stronger degree when the Jew, outwitted and frustrated in Master Shakespeare's *Merchant of Venice*, turns and leaves the Court in silence. Meseemeth there is more of the heart-moving tragedy of defeat in that dumb dejection and despair than in many passionate outpourings of words.

On this so plain and simple stage, labelled Illyria, the master dramatist in his Twelfth Night fantasy held up the mirror unto all Nature. Not one there but could, methought, have taken something to himself from the wit and wisdom and truths that fell from the players' mouths.

Belike fair Lady Arabella may have marked especially the lines—

"Unstaid and skittish in all motions else,
Save in the constant image of the creature
That is beloved ;"

and the wise advice on which later she acted not—

"Let still the woman take
An elder than herself ; so wears she to him."

And maybe my Lord Pembroke stole a glance at

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a certain dark maid when the page sweetly avowed to the Duke Orsino, "My father had a daughter loved a man, as it might be, perhaps, were I a woman, I should your lordship."

"She never told her love,
But let concealment, like a worm in the bud,
Feed on her damask cheek: she pined in thought,
And, with a green and yellow melancholy,
She sat, like patience on a monument,
Smiling at grief. Was not this love indeed?"

Ambrosia, howsoever she "pined in thought," showed outwardly in sooth no signs of a green and yellow melancholy. 'Twas true that she smiled, but not like "patience on a monument." A creature of life and fire, she looked that night as if born for gaiety, love, laughter and motion. Aye, but my lord must have known that beneath it all a wound of his making yet bled, and would never be healed!

The play being over, a rumour went about the hall that Master William Shakespeare was present amongst his company of players behind the scenes. The King immediately asked his host to present to him the great dramatist whose works he had the good taste to admire and study.

So the audience tarried in their places while my Lord Pembroke led forth Master Shakespeare by the hand up to where His Majesty was sitting. Thus I saw those two together again, and till I die, the

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picture they made as they advanced to the King's chair through the brightly-lighted hall, where the eyes and gems of so many fair ladies shone and flashed in rivalry, will never be effaced from my memory. My Lord Pembroke seemed as if, of a purpose, to take on a humbler air beside his friend. For all his pride of carriage and richness of raiment, methought my lord's eyes said plainly, "See, I am but a beggar compared with him." And yet, I saw the invisible golden thread of that love, "passing the love of women," which had inspired the immortal sonnets, yoking them together in the roll of fame.

Side by side they kneeled, the wondrous genius who was for "all time," and the Earl who for polished courtesy and grace was one of the chief ornaments of his age, and both did homage to the boorish King.

XXIV

YEARS PASS

THE bridal of my Lord Pembroke and Lady Mary Talbot was celebrated with high feasting at Wilton, and by a great tilt-of-arms on the field of tournament near Amesbury, which in the reign of King Richard Cœur de Lion had been a famous jousting place.

Some two years after my Lord was wed, his revered mother, our beloved Countess, ceased to dwell any longer at Wilton House, and she, her household, and most of the members of the Areopagus, moved to Crosby Place, a fair mansion in the City of London, which she rented from my Lord Northampton. There she lived till the year 1615, continuing her literary labours and chemical researches, and her patronage of letters with zeal, much beloved and respected by high and low alike. Her society was as greatly sought and prized as ever by poets and dramatists, and Masters Ben Jonson, Heywood, Donne, Sir Fulke Greville, and others, frequently visited her at Crosby Place. During ten years of her residence there, she often begged me of Master Meredith, and so it

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happened that I had spent near as great a part of my time with her in London as in the country. It went to my heart to leave my kind guardian alone, yet he ever insisted on my going, declaring that 'twas for my infinite good and advantage to be with my lady, as indeed it was.

I have spoken somewhere of long years, but in looking back on them they seem to us ever to have taken unto themselves wings, and to have flown quickly away into that eternity where time is not. Nevertheless, there are hours and even minutes that have seemed to us as long as a lifetime, because they have had so much significance and weight in our own private history.

To attempt to chronicle all the events of wider and public import, which passed while I lived so near the scene of them in the Countess of Pembroke's household at Crosby Place, would fill too many reams of paper, and take up more time in the writing thereof than I can well spare from this the evening of my days on earth.

So I will recall but briefly a few memories of my visits to the palatial old house which standeth in Bishopsgate Street, with the gardens of Winchester House on the one side and Gresham House on the other, so that with its own 'tis set in a very labyrinth of pleasant grass lawns, flower-plots, and shady trees.

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Sir Thomas More once lived there, and many a lively colloquy he must have had in the dark oak chambers of Crosby Place with his beloved Erasmus, and in the vaulted hall at the foot of its carved, shining, oak staircase the bold lover of Sir Robert Spencer's daughter had stood disguised as a baker, and carried off the heiress for his bride in a basket with the loaves and manchets. My lady laughed as she told the story, and of how Queen Bess afterwards had asked Sir Robert to be sponsor at a christening, and when he had come to the font, he discovered that the babe was his runaway daughter's child, and he could not but be reconciled with her husband.

From time to time I saw that the Countess was in concern and distress at sundry stories which reached her ears of her second son Philip's misdeeds. He had been married in the Royal Chapel at Whitehall to the Lady Susan Vere, and was held to be the King's first favourite until supplanted somewhat in his affections by Carr, a young man of indifferent birth and breeding, who from a lucky fall off his horse in His Majesty's sight had risen with a bound to be Lord of Rochester, Earl of Somerset, and among the highest and richest in the land; when he in his turn had to make way for a new minion. Philip Herbert had grown to be more and more quarrelsome and choleric, and kept pace with his

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kinsman, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, in finding cause for fighting and duelling. His affairs of honour were often the talk of the town, if not the scandal of the Court, which was belike too scandalous to be scandalized thereat. To my infinite great pain I was spectator of the Countess one day weeping and nigh tearing her beautiful hair on being told that this son, who bore her beloved brother's name, had been ignominiously whipped in an affray at Croydon races. "'Twould appear," said she, "that while others still cherish his memory and pattern themselves upon his bright example, my own forget him. Ah, my Philip, thy godson and nephew proveth himself daily more unworthy of thee."

She often did thus, my lady, address the dead as if he were beside her, as in life. True 'twas, what she said, that the tradition of Sir Philip Sidney's fine chivalry lived on for noble youth to shape itself upon. Wonderful it was, too, that in literature his laurels remained still so fresh. Arcadiaism had been in sooth no passing fashion, as Euphuism had been, for even then ladies and gentlemen strove to converse with each other in its language, and the novelists and playwrights sought material and found it in the famed romance's inexhaustible wealth of story. Several authors tried their hand at continuations of the *Countess of Pembroke's Arcadia*, and sequels

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thereto. Master Quarles, for instance, who came to Crosby Place to present to my lady his *Argalus and Parthenia*, which he described as "a scion taken out of the orchard of Sir Philip Sidney of precious memory, grafted on a crab-stock in mine own."

I remember the mild, still November eve that I looked out from one of the lattices in the Countess's chamber over the housetops and gables of the city, and saw the lunar rainbow of portentous omen in the sky. The life of the hopeful young Prince whose forwardness in wisdom had won him the national esteem and love, was hanging on a thread, and this sign in the heavens convinced the people that he could not recover. The augury proved a true one, for though the great prisoner, Sir Walter Raleigh, mixed in his laboratory in the Tower his marvellous Grand Cordial, and sent a dose to the dying youth who had been his staunchest champion against the King's tyranny and injustice, the Prince did but slightly rally and died that night. Great was the mourning and weeping over this active young life so full of promise, cut off in its flower, on the eve of the nuptials of the Princess Elizabeth, the darling sister for whom he had cherished more than the common love of brothers. Poor Queen Anne the Dane was nigh distraught with grief, and I thought of that golden summer afternoon at Wilton, when I had first seen the Prince, a mere slip

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of a boy then, lying on the sward with his head pillowed against his mother's knee, and how dotingly she had looked down on his fair curls.

'Twas said the Queen loved not her younger son with half the devotion that she loved Prince Henry who had been the apple of her eye, and, when in Prince Charles's weakly babyhood his Scottish nurse could not force him to take his physic and feared that he would die, the Queen prophesied that he would live to be the plague of three nations.

The first time that I came to my lady at Crosby Place I saw Ambrosia constantly, for my Lady Arabella had her lodgings close by in Winchester House. Those were yet bright days for the unfortunate lady. The King continued his favours towards her. The Queen treated her verily as a sister, and she was her carver at table, an office over which Lady Arabella made merry in those letters with which she kept her uncle and aunt posted up in the affairs of the Court and the world. Her gay laugh still rippled forth as she writ her droll epistles. She still danced at the masques, and shone with the brilliance of a thousand jewels for which she had gotten into debt, still rejected the suit of princely lovers, and racked her brains over the choice of New Year's gifts.

Then came the notorious "Masque of Blackness" at Theobalds in honour of the King of Denmark, the

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Queen's brother, when two monarchs drank themselves speechless with my Lord Cecil's *aqua vitæ*, and high-bred ladies reeled about like tipsy hucksters' wives. At this scene of coarse revelry Mr. William Seymour made his re-appearance at the Court after his three years' banishment, and met once more her whom he loved with the ardour and pure passion of his stainless youth. And she may well have greeted one so much more in sympathy with her refined tastes than those around her with the light of love in her blue eyes. The difference of years betwixt them was bridged, indeed, by that most perfect intellectual sympathy. Ambrosia ever declared that no pair could be better matched. Despairing of gaining the King's sanction my Lady Arabella was secretly wed to Mr. Seymour, with the knowledge and approval of her aunt, the Countess of Shrewsbury. She dreamed fondly, aye, how fondly, of flying with her lover and husband beyond the realm and tyranny of her royal kinsman. She pictured, belike, some quiet, peaceful home beneath the azure skies of Italy, in the city of flowers where Dante first beheld his Beatrice. There she saw herself tasting at last of the simple domestic joys which wives and mothers know who have no blood of kings running in their veins. Alack for my Lady Arabella's sweet dream-home! 'twas destined to fall in ruins like a house of cards, on the discovery of her privy marriage and

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before the wrath and implacable vengeance of King James.

Mr. Seymour was ordered to the Tower and my Lady Arabella to be restrained in the house of a gentleman at Lambeth ; but such love as theirs laughs at locksmiths, and with only the Thames rolling betwixt them these two found means of exchanging billets, and Ambrosia could tell, methinks, how 'twas done. The little Margaret Byron who so passionately adored my Lady Arabella and was tenderly loved by her in return, was taken away from her mistress on her falling into adversity, but Ambrosia remained with her always, abandoning very cheerfully her youthful pleasures and the exercises which were meat and drink to her active nature, to devote herself absolutely to this fair hapless creature.

As I have said before, 'tis Ambrosia who could fill in the countless details of this most sad and tragical story of love, despair and tyrant's cruelty, which I can only touch on in outline as I draw near the end of my own. When the King commanded my Lord Bishop of Durham to fetch my Lady Arabella away from Lambeth, out of her husband's neighbourhood, to the far north, she resisted with weeping and loud cries, and in truth her swoons and sickness made it impossible to move her further than Highgate. Here she was permitted to tarry, till her health should

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recover itself enough to continue the journey, in the house of a Mr. Conyers. This gentleman was a compassionate and lenient gaoler, and 'twas easy for the Lady Arabella, with the aid of her aunt Lady Shrewsbury and her husband's friends, and Ambrosia's wits and resourcefulness, to attempt escape. On a calm Sunday in June she emerged on the high road in doublet and hose, swaggering it like any young gallant of the day. But how the knees within the high russet riding-boots shook, how ghastly pale the delicate face beneath the black wig and slouch plumed hat. "Aye," said the ostler at the inn where she mounted her horse, "that young gentleman will scarce hold out to London." Riding through the fresh summer breezes, colour came back to her cheek and her spirits rose. She "held out" even so far as the little French barque which was to have borne her and him, for whom she had sacrificed so much, over seas to live and love beneath happier skies. The lamentations of the Lady Arabella may be imagined when the vessel set sail without Mr. Seymour, he not having succeeded in getting from the Tower to the wharf at the appointed hour.

"No sooner had we gotten out to sea," Ambrosia related afterwards, "when we heard the firing of great guns, and there was a cruiser bearing down upon us. My sweet lady rushed on deck in an agony and pro-

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claimed herself to the captain, who struck his flag after a broadside had been discharged on us. Our captors demanded Mr. Seymour, and my Lady Arabella said, 'I hope he is safely landed out of your reach. If he hath escaped, my joy for him is greater than my grief for myself.' "

Thus the fair fugitive was brought back and sent to the Tower, with her faithful attendants and friends, there to await the King's pleasure, and 'twas never to be his pleasure to let her forth from that abode of sighs and groans, of shattered hopes and blighted lives. Whilst she pined within those gloomy portals, such a richly-stored master mind as Raleigh's could apply itself to the gigantic task of writing a history of the world, and even unbend to enjoy cultivating a little patch of garden on the walls, beneath which the multitude he despised came to gape at him openmouthed.

But the Lady Arabella, of a more fragile intellect, could do naught but petition for her liberty and mourn her fate. She sat all day pen in hand, ever writing, but not letters now brimming over with fun and witty comments on men and things. Instead, 'twas those heart-rending appeals that she writ, first to the King and the Lords of his Council, and when these took no notice, then to the Queen and her cousin Lady Jane Drummond, whom she entreated

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to mediate on her behalf. Blotted and blurred with her tears, these documents failed in their object. His Majesty's heart, if he had one withal, remained untouched.

"Much weeping hath robbed my dear lady of her fair looks," writ Ambrosia; "'tis pitiful to see how changed she is, pitiful to see her tears, but methinks 'tis most pitiful of all to hear her laugh, for this she only doth when she wandereth in her mind and babbles of the time before she was so misfortuned."

Aye, well did I understand that this was saddest of all! The laugh which once was a delight to hear as it rippled forth, within the prison walls must sound, methought, like "sweet bells jangled out of tune."

The closing scene of this pitiful tragedy was very near, and Lady Arabella soon to be released from her sufferings and imprisonment, not by the King, but by the more omnipotent potentate Death, when I, after my last visit to the Countess at Crosby Place, went home. For in June of the year 1608 the King granted my lady the Manor of Houghton Conquest, and thither she resolved to retire to live the rest of her life.

XXV

THE RETURN OF NAT

'Twas passing sweet and restful to be at the Rectory again. I seemed to have looked on at many events and seen many changes whilst in London, but here naught was changed. The village, from its perch on the hillside, still smiled down on the same fertile slopes and meads below it, and the same stretches of chalky down swept away above it into the sky. There were the sheepfolds with their soft fleecy inmates packed close within, and the blue-cloaked shepherds with their crooks sitting like sentinels to watch them. The lark's song was of the same joyous shrillness; the same flowers came up in their season in the dear breeze-swept gardens. Swains and lasses danced upon the green. The aged bedeswomen of the Spital in Wilton lived on and sunned themselves in the flint porches as if they would never die. From the opal haze of distance, Salisbury spire rose queenly as ever, mounting guard over the world of beauty around it.

Not a hair of Master Meredith's silver head had

The Return of Nat

changed, albeit he descried a thread of white in the brownness of my locks. His rare pallor was still unlined, and, as regularly as the sun had risen and set, he had pursued the routine of his simple studious life.

I had much to tell Master Meredith about my lady, whom he had sorely missed in these years, the present châtelaine of Wilton House being in no wise a lover of books and literature, which belike was as much a disappointment to her lord as her bearing him no children. In sooth, Master Meredith and I had ever much to converse upon, whether I had been away or not. He was less shy in these days of talking of the opus, and on my home-coming he did read aloud to me his chapter on Sappho, which had taken the leisure of nigh fourteen years to write. Methought he had achieved his ambition therein, and that the periods did really roll forth as majestically as Master Hooker's.

As we came, Master Meredith and I, one summer night from Salisbury, through fields of waving grain in which the grasshoppers chirruped, Master Meredith told me that Ralph Cotton, another of my Lord Bishop's numerous sons, had set his affections on me as his brother Robert had once done on Ambrosia.

"What dost thou say to his suit, child? Thou should'st have been long since matched, and if I do

The Return of Nat

not see thee wed ere I die, I shall feel that I have not done my duty by thee, as thy father would have wished."

And then I told Master Meredith as I had told the Countess, when a suitor in London had asked her permission to make his addresses to me, that I was happy unwedded, and would never take any for my husband whom I had not learned to respect and love.

Master Meredith did not reason with me on the subject, and seemed, methought, satisfied with my answer.

But after we had walked in silence a little distance, drinking in the loveliness of the summer sky, its blue yet stained with the glory of the departed sun, while a young moon and the evening star had risen there, Master Meredith said :

"'Tis somewhat on my conscience that I have never mentioned to you that some years ago my friend, Master Dean, asked me for your hand, that is to say, he asked me if I thought he had any hope of winning you, and, without consulting you, child, I said none. Assuredly 'twould have been too unequal a match, he with his white hairs and goodly burden of years, and my little dove, who seemeth to me to have increased in wisdom without growing older, and in her looks and aspect ever to be a child."

The Return of Nat

"But, sir, you said yesterday I was growing grey," I laughed, then added gravely :

"Age would be no stumbling-block to me in the man I took for a husband if he were the one I could love above all others."

We had come to the stile, and as we rested there a-while, I saw that Master Meredith was looking at me wistfully, but with that tender smile on his lips which, ever since he had met me with it long ago in the courtyard of the Old George, had given me a sense of rest and comfort and trust to see.

He said no more on the subject of marriage, but, gazing upwards at the stars flashing out by myriads in the pale sky, exclaimed suddenly :

"You were inquiring, Jeanne, this morning, what had happened in Burcombe whilst you were away in London. And I made answer, Naught—naught save the ordinary christenings, bridals and burials, and the little common events of every day, such as the clerk crying in church the straying of a bullock or sheep. But look up at that jewelled canopy. Think if that were seen but once in a hundred years, how men would talk of it with wonder and amazement, and pray that they might live to see it again. The floor of heaven spangled with diamonds before our very eyes! How marvellous! What a miracle if one saw it only once! And 'tis the same with the painted



NAT'S RETURN.

The Return of Nat

pageant in the clouds at the rising and setting of the sun, the putting forth of the green shoots in spring, the fire of autumn leaves and berries, the virgin whiteness of winter snows. In the quietest nooks and most forsaken spots on earth something great is always happening for those who have eyes and ears for the beauties and wonders of God's universe."

With Master Meredith talking thus, we had drawn near the churchyard wicket, when a sound, 'twixt a sigh and a groan, coming from within it, fell on our ears. In the gloaming we saw the outline of a dark and ragged figure a-lying outstretched, with head on the grass and legs across the path.

"A poor vagrant outcast, perchance. I must go and speak with him, and offer him alms and shelter." So saying, Master Meredith left me to walk on, but I had not gone many paces ere I heard him calling me back.

"'Tis Nat!" Master Meredith said. "'Tis my son Nat!"

XXVI

JOY COMETH IN THE MORNING

NAT had come home, but, alas ! not bringing his sheaves with him. He had come penniless, aged and wasted by I know not what sins and adventures, and sick unto death. Aye, 'twas clear that he had come home but to die. Yet I thanked God that he had come. When Master Meredith had bent over him in the churchyard, Nat had not been able to speak from faintness. How then had the father so soon recognized his once brilliant boy in the broken-down man with matted, grizzled beard, whose emaciated form was huddled in the sorriest clothing. Perchance 'twas because he had in these years of his deep and unspoken sorrow, often pictured and expected this home-coming of his son in the plight of the prodigal of old, and so was always prepared for it.

Nat opened his eyes and came to himself, lying 'twixt the snowy, lavender-scented sheets of the dainty bed, which had never been occupied since his beautiful mother had last slept in it. For this was how Master Meredith killed his fatted calf. He

Joy cometh in the Morning

unlocked the door of his shrine, and with the gentleness of a woman laid his son a-bed in the chamber that he had so long kept swept and garnished as if in readiness for the return of its owner. "Twas the first time I had been inside the room, that night I followed Master Meredith as he and Luke helped his son thither. Now I saw at near view what before I had only seen through the window, the Nankin jar filled with freshly-cut flowers, the mirror and gewgaws, the graving of "Death and the Knight" hanging near the bedhead. I felt conscious only of the strangeness of being in the chamber, till Nat, revived by the strong cordials administered to him by old Dorcas, began to speak hurriedly, as if he feared he might lose the strength and power to do so, ere he had said what he wanted :

"Father, forgive me for coming home like this, a wreck, beggared and unclean. But it won't be for long. Father, I have been through the furnace, aye, not one but many ! It was a failure, after all, going to sea. I have been scorched and withered by tropical heats, frozen and frost-bitten in arctic seas. I have found riches and squandered them again ; made money, and been gulled and robbed. I have been in prison and worked in the galleys, kept company with thieves and rogues, and . . . once I killed a man,—by accident, but still I killed him. How could

Joy cometh in the Morning

I come home to you after that, to you, the saint, and those pure angels, my sister and Jeanne? I saw Ambrosia once driving in a coach in the streets of London, and I was in the gutter. Father, I had a friend, a sea captain, who might tell you more, but I don't know where he is now——"

"Hush, my dear boy. Say no more, the past is over and done with. Forget it and turn thy thoughts to the future," said Master Meredith, and the tones of his voice were indescribably loving and musical, but Nat went on :

"There's one thing more, father, I must tell you. Methinks 'tis the worst of all. Once I was on my way home, not in quite such a miserable plight, not sunk so low as I am now . . . but I didn't come . . . I went instead to my mother's people."

Master Meredith had not shrank or shown emotion at any part of Nat's confession, till this. Now he flinched and pressed his fingers tightly on the hand that lay in his.

"One of them came to me and told me my mother was a gipsy, and I thought that explained all—my restlessness, my longing to wander and be on the move. So I flung everything to the winds, and vowed I would live the free, lawless life that they did, my mother's people, and take no thought for the morrow, sleeping beneath the open sky or the forest's

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shade. But 'twas too late. I had ruined my health with tropical heats and loose living. My blood would not tingle and dance in my veins any more. I had too much education left, after all, to make a happy-go-lucky gipsy, and too little spirit. They wearied of me, and when I fell sick they left me to starve on the damp earth, and to catch my death . . . so here I am, father, come home, home to die. . . .”

His head fell back on the pillow, and he looked as if he would faint again. He had spoken so boyishly, with such unfaltering eagerness that something of the old Nat seemed to glimmer through the poor, haggard, worn wayfarer, lying there under “Death and the Knight.”

His lips still moved as if he would fain say more, but could not from exhaustion.

Master Meredith bowed his head on Nat's hand. Then, in accents of profoundest pity and tenderness he said again, “'Tis dead. Forget the past, dear son. You and I will bury it. God knoweth 'tis I—I who am to blame. *Culpa mea!*”

Nat made a gesture of dissent, but for a moment a smile flickered on his ghastly, sunken features. Then he sank into a doze, but soon woke again with glittering eyes, in the burning agony of fever. He talked wildly of things we could not understand, but now and then in his delirious wanderings lifted the

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veil from his past life, so that certain incidents stood out in all their naked horror and sadness. Master Meredith gazing earnestly upon him suddenly started, and rose from his knees with a cry. Bidding Luke keep watch he motioned me from the chamber.

“My child,” said he, “you must leave this house instantly, and find a lodging in Wilton or Sarum. Go, go, and pray God ’twill be in time and thou escapest! ’Tis the plague, I know the symptoms! My poor, poor son hath gotten the plague.”

Thus the spectre of pestilence, so dreaded that the mention of it sent even husbands flying from their wives and wives from their husbands, which had so often scourged London, and in years to come was to stalk through fair Sarum’s city rendering it a desolation, thus it made its entry into the little village on the hill; brought thither by the rector’s son, who had been bred up in its pure and health-giving airs. I had often sickened at the thought of the terrible disease, but now I felt no fear of it; and refused to leave Master Meredith. Every member of the little household except good Luke fled, even Mrs. Dorcas, who had been friend as well as servant to her master through weal and woe for such a number of years. She besought me to bear her company, and Master Meredith urged and prayed me to go, but I was determined to stay.

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"I am not afraid," I said, "so I will help nurse Nat." I had heard my lady's physician say that 'twas mostly the panic-stricken that took the infection, that the danger was lessened for those who remained calm and unafraid.

"Every moment that you linger makes it worse," Master Meredith said. "Little Jeanne, dear child of the friend of my youth, I entreat thee to go. How can I let you tarry and take this awful risk? Go, go to my Lord Bishop's lady and she will take thee in."

"That would be wrong," said I, "for if there is danger, I should be dangerous to others. 'Tis useless to tell me to go, dear sir, for in this I will not obey you,—you who took me the desolate little orphan into your home, and have been as a loving father to me all these years, do you think I would desert you now, in this hour of dire trouble?"

And then he ceased to try and persuade me, and only said, "God bless you!"

Together he and I, with none but Luke to relieve us, watched by poor Nat and tended him through all the ravages and pains of the fell sickness. By the time it reached its climax, Nat, spent and wasted by other diseases, had not the power to rally, and he died.

He was buried at dead of night, and so affrighted

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were the villagers of us that none would dig his grave. So Luke performed that sad office, and stood with me as mourner, while Master Meredith by the light of a lanthorn read over his son those ineffably beautiful words from the prayer-book, to which, though he had read them many hundreds of times, the silver tones of his voice seemed to lend a new music and a new significance.

I thought as we turned away from the grave in the faint moonbeams, what memorable associations the quaint little graveyard would ever contain for Master Meredith. For there he had first seen the "Egyptian woman" whom he made his wife, and there he had found again his long-lost son, and there he had now left him lying beneath the daisied sod, to await the day of resurrection in a world beyond that bourne from which no traveller returneth.

The next morning Master Meredith went into the garden to look at his neglected flower knots, and though the sun shone warmly, he shivered as the air met his face. He came back to the study and sought for his fur tippet, but ere I could help him to find it, he sank into a chair, and pale as he always was, turned paler, whilst black marks showed beneath his eyes. . . . 'Twas what I feared, Master Meredith was stricken with the plague! Again he implored me to go forth and leave him, not to come near or touch

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him. Again I laughed at the idea, and said I knew no fear for myself; I was sure the plague would not infect me. And so God willed it. Most mercifully He spared me all my health and strength, so that I was able in some measure to requite Master Meredith's unfailing goodness to me, by nursing him back from out the jaws of so terrible a death to life again. Few ever recovered from that fatal malady, but, God be praised, it pleased Him that Master Meredith should recover.

My dear lady, the Countess of Pembroke, was versed in the healing arts, and of all I owed her methinks I was most grateful to her for imparting to me some of her skill in the mixing of potions and preparing of salves, for the leechcraft I had learned from her stood me in good stead now when I most needed it.

Aye, what long and anxious hours those were through which I watched sleeplessly and tearlessly day and night! How I bathed the dear brow with perfumed waters, smoothed the pillow, held cooling cordials to the dry black lips, and laid my finger on the galloping pulse, praying, ever praying prayers without words. And then the change came in the pulse. 'Twas low and feeble of a sudden, and I sent Luke for wine,—no fiery sack, but soft Bordeaux with the glint of rubies in it, which came long ago

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from the cellars of the Pembrokes. I poured but a little down Master Meredith's throat, and it wondrously revived him. He had thrown off the fever, and although he was weak as a babe, I dared hope now that he would mend. And slowly, by weary inches 'tis true, he did mend. His precious life was saved, and I had saved it. Could I ever be thankful enough that it was I who had saved it, that it was through me he was spared for more years of good works, for more ministering to souls, and preaching the gospel; for writing more chapters of his opus? Ah, the dear opus!

In his wanderings he had talked much of it, and had cast and recast sentences till it had made my brain near crack to hearken to him. And as I had learned things from Nat's delirium, so I had learned something from Master Meredith's. A blessed and beautiful secret, which filled me with the greatest joy I had ever known. "Age would be no stumbling-block in the man I took for my husband, if he were the one I could love above all others." Mine own words that I had spoken as we passed through the golden corn that fair summer night on which Nat came home. Why had they lingered with Master Meredith so that while he lay here sick of the plague, they came to his lips in delirium? And the question had followed—' Could I be that one, little Jeanne, white-souled dove?

Joy cometh in the Morning

Could I, old man that I am, be the one you loved above all others?"

I had withholden my answer till such time as Master Meredith should be restored to his health, and then I gave it with my head upon his breast, which was ever the haven where I would be.

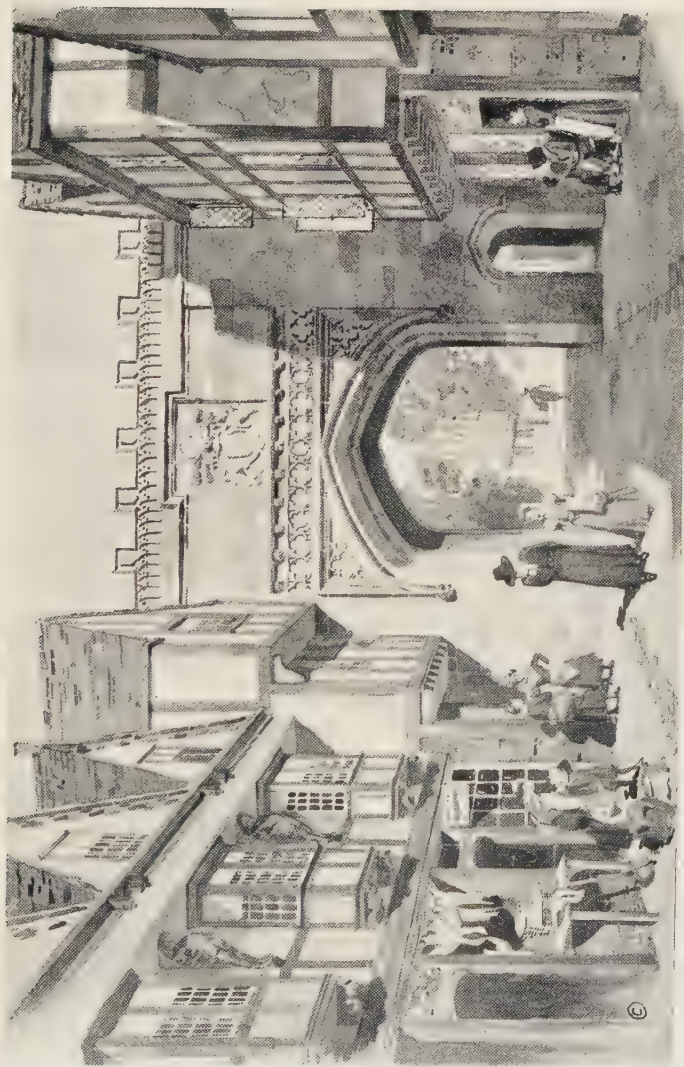
CONCLUSION

LITTLE had I thought, when of old I had sat waiting for my guardian in the branches of the weeping willow overhanging the clear brown river, at the end of the Deanery garden, that I should ever come to be mistress there.

But this had happened when my husband had succeeded his old friend as Dean of Salisbury, and we had come from the little lowly Rectory of Burcombe to make our home in the Deanery, which seemed to me at first a very palace to dwell in, with its spacious panelled rooms and wide oak staircase.

One day in the summer of 1621 I was standing by the sundial amidst the clipped yews which glistened in the morning dew, watching my little Philip hanging a daisy-chain about his toddling sister's neck, when I heard the sound of horses' feet on the flag-stones in front of the house.

"Come quickly, Philip," I called, "and bid your big sister and small nephew welcome." He came running



GATEWAY OF THE CLOSE, SALISBURY.

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to me, dragging fat little Mary, who stumbled over her long taffetas frock and apron, by the hand.

I caught up my baby girl in my arms, and with Philip clinging to my skirt, went into the hall to greet Ambrosia Crompton, her husband and boy. The three had been on a visit to Ambrosia's god-mother, the Dowager Countess of Pembroke, at her fair seat, Houghton Conquest, in Bedfordshire, and Ambrosia, true to her promise, had come to bring me tidings of my dear lady.

The tragedy of Lady Arabella Stuart's secret marriage and its piteous sequel, with which Ambrosia had been so deeply concerned, had left its mark upon her. She was now a beautiful stately woman, with grey threads in her raven hair, and a cloud of sadness on her face, which had extinguished much of the brilliance and vivacity of her youth. 'Twas long before Ambrosia would consent to put off the mourning weeds she had worn for the Lady Arabella and Nat at the same time, to don her bridal gown. But Mr. Crompton, one of William Seymour's and the hapless lady's faithful friends, who had aided their ill-starred escape, and with whom Ambrosia had been much associated in those exciting days, had wooed her with such ardour and impassioned persistency, that, at last, she had given him her hand. Mr. Crompton was an excellent gentleman

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of considerable fortune and position, and Ambrosia confessed that she was well-off. Her little Nat was the image of what his mother and uncle had been, and the light of her eyes. In truth, she was loth to trust him out of her sight now when my little ones carried him off to play in their nursery, and she sent one of her women after to watch that no harm befell him.

Ambrosia bantered me, as she always did, when we met, asking if I were still satisfied with the lot of an "old man's darling," and she declared that I appeared to thrive well enow on't, and was growing plump.

And then her husband went to seek mine, her dear father, and Ambrosia threw off her wide-brimmed hat, with the drooping scarlet plume, and seated herself on the floor, as she was wont to do in old days.

"I know that you are dying by this time," said she, "to hear how my godmother fareth; in sooth, Jeanne, she is one of the wonders of the time, so lightly doth she bear the burden of her years and sorrows. Old she can never be, methinks, even if she lives to be a hundred. 'Age cannot wither her or stale her infinite variety,' may be truly said of her as of the great Egyptian Queen. She is to receive the King at Houghton this summer, and beginneth preparations

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apace. Yet she speaks often of death, which she rather seemeth to look forward to than dread, and hath made her will. One of her bequests to thee she hath entrusted to me to bring thee by hand. 'Tis the poems of Du Bartas, done into English by Sir Philip and in his handwriting."

"Oh, my gracious lady! What a priceless gift!" I exclaimed. "Hast thou got it in thy cloak-bag?"

"Nay, it shall not be unpacked yet, or we shall have thee poring over the crabbed writing and devouring it, forgetful of all thy duties of hospitality," Ambrosia said laughing, and then she went on to talk of the splendid buildings my lady had added to the mansion of Houghton Conquest, of the painted ceilings, and statues, and garden-house designed by Master Inigo Jones.

It rejoiced me to hear this good report of the Countess, that she was still in health, bearing the burden of her years lightly, and methought I might again have the felicity of meeting her once more on earth, if she should come perchance to visit her son, my lord, at Wilton.

But 'twas not to be. Only in the September of that same year, the deep toll of the Cathedral bell boomed solemnly forth on the still air, which had already the chill breath of autumn in it. As I came from morning prayers across the sward, belted in the

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sunlight with the shadows of pinnacle and buttress Jasper overtook me.

"It tolleth for our sweet and beloved lady," he said. "God rest her soul! She passed away last night at Crosby Place, whither she had journeyed from Bedfordshire. Her remains will be brought hither and laid beside her lord in the vault of the Herberts."

I could not speak, the dolorous news had come so suddenly. Yet 'twas well indeed, thought I, that my lady had been spared a long sickness, that she had known no abatement of her vigour, no wasting of her rare powers of mind.

My little golden-haired son came dancing out to meet us through the Deanery gates. On seeing my fast-falling tears and his father's heavy countenance, he ceased his gay laughter and looked up at us with the searching inquiry of childhood.

"Why doth mother cry?" he asked.

"Mother is sad," said I, and he began to cry too. I led him within to my chamber, and taking him on my lap told him why I was sad.

"'Tis because a good and great lady is gone from hence, little Phil. One whose price was above rubies, whom the ages to come will never match. That fair lady had a brother who hath been many years in heaven, sweet Phil, whose name thou

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bearest. What that brother was, and how she loved that brother, and how he loved her, and how they will never be forgotten because of their loveliness, their goodness, and their beautiful love for each other—I will tell you when you are bigger and older, withal, for now thou art too young to understand.”

“Too young!” As I write the words, my Philip and Mary, aye, and even my last babes, little Jack and Joan, have long grown into men and women, and I have seen my children’s children.

And ’tis for them, methinks, I have garnered these memories and set them down in these pages, with eyes that have grown dim from age, but with a heart full of thanksgiving for the infinite mercies with which God has blessed me all the days of my life.

And as the sweet-tongued bells ring out across the snow the opening of another year, I at length inscribe “The End,” and the pen falls from my hand.

Writ by Mistress Jeanne Meredith,
from the Close, at Sarum,
this thirty-first day of December,
in the year of our Lord 1655.

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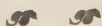
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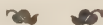
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